Wings of Anemos

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Summary: Generations ago, the Kings of Anemos took their people and fled the world, becoming little more than a myth. When myths come alive, however, Weyard's most recent heroes find themselves struggling to balance their own issues in this new world against the future of Weyard itself, learning the price some must pay to be heroes.

Chapter 1: Catastrophe

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 1 – Catastrophe

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Children ran through the streets, screaming their gleeful cries. Ivan found himself among them, running along the cobbled roads barefoot as they weaved in and out of the adults. The sun shone brightly overhead, not a cloud in sight to threaten their games with rain.

They left the roads, running onto the grass, and Ivan felt the cool, refreshing grass brush at his soles as he ran after the others. He held his arms out as he jumped off a hill, trying to soar through the air, but even crashing back to the ground did nothing to dampen his spirit. He simply brushed the dirt from his knees and chased the boy in front of him.

On a bench nearby sat a man and a woman, both with their hands in their laps. As Ivan ran past them, he noticed that their faces bore expressions of solemn sadness. Had they lost someone close to them? He thought if they just got up and ran with him, they would feel better, but he moved on, saying nothing.

When he looked forward again, he noticed that he had fallen behind, the others not realizing he had slowed. He shouted for them, speeding up again, but they did not hear him. As they ran back into the street, a shadow suddenly fell across him and he ran headlong into a woman. He backed up to apologize, but when he looked up, he saw tears in her eyes.

She did not respond to his questioning, simply staring at him with a despairing expression and shaking her head softly. When she stepped aside, Ivan could not see his friends anywhere. They had completely vanished. He spun in a circle, now noticing that he could not see anybody at all. The street that had been full only moments ago now lay empty.

A shadow fell across him again. He looked up and found a black sky, the afternoon sun completely obscured by storm clouds. He needed to get home, he realized. His mother would be worried about him.

He shook his head. His mother was dead. He could not even remember what she looked like. Looking down at his hands, he realized he was no longer barefoot, nor a child, but once again a young man, almost an adult.

A thunderclap returned his attention to the sky, a nameless horror settling into his stomach. Something terrible was waiting behind those clouds, though he had no idea what. A flash of lightning struck a nearby building, transforming the roof into an inferno that quickly spread to other buildings and scorched the ground.

Bolts of lightning began to rain down around Ivan, destroying whatever they touched, but he paid no attention to them. His attention was still focused on the sky and the unspeakable object of dread behind it. He wanted nothing more to run, but his legs refused to obey.

When the clouds parted and he opened his mouth to scream, nothing but a hoarse rasp came out, forcing him to stand there and watch as the moon crashed down onto the town.

Garet breathed in slowly, exhaling in the same manner. He needed control here; this particular opponent demanded it. He could not afford to blast away recklessly, or swing at full strength. Precision was of the utmost importance right now.

Stepping forward, he punched his hand forward, a burst of flame launching from his open palm. It flew true towards his opponent's feet, but the other person jumped to the side and began running forward at him. Garet stood his ground, launching carefully calculated strikes at his attacker. Neither of them wielded a weapon; neither needed one. The destructive flames each commanded rendered a weapon meaningless.

Halting the approach temporarily, his adversary whipped out return shots in a pair of sidearm throws, forcing Garet to shunt them aside with burning fists. His opponent took the opportunity to close the distance and the two met in a clash of flames. They traded blow after blow, fire streaking from their strikes and narrowly missing each combatant.

Slowly Garet moved back, step by step, retreating from the fierce attacks. He knew he could not keep up a defense forever, so as he stepped back, he spun into a crouch, swinging his leg across the ground. His foe, however, saw the strike coming and hopped over the sweep, landing with his hand pointed like a spear at Garet's throat.

Garet smiled. "That was good. Your reflexes are getting better, too."

His opponent smiled, pulling his hand back. "Really? You mean it, Garet?"

Laughing, Garet stood up and ruffled the boy's hair. "Someday, I'll have to live with the shame of being beaten by my little brother. I think I've got some time left, though."

The boy jumped into the air, whooping. "Did you hear that, Isaac? Soon I'll be able to beat anyone, even Garet!"

Isaac returned the grin. "Tell you what, Aaron. I'll make it easier for you. In the next few days, I'll show you exactly how to beat him."

Aaron snorted. "No way. You only won last year 'cause Garet wasn't in it. This year, there's gonna be a new Colosso champion." He gasped as hands grabbed him around the waist, pulling him into the air and depositing him on Garet's shoulders.

"Come on, shorty, let's go find some food. Coming, Isaac?"

The blond shook his head. "No, I ate only a couple hours ago."

"So? I did too. Eating makes the body grow!" Garet thumped his chest as if to prove his point, then looked up at Aaron and whispered loudly, "That's why he won't be able to win. He doesn't eat enough."

Aaron giggled and waved. "Bye Isaac!"

Isaac waved back. "Keep an eye on your brother. Don't let him get into trouble."

"He's ten. How much trouble can he get into?"

"Garet, I was talking to Aaron."

Grumbling under his breath at Isaac's grin, Garet turned around and began walking down the hill, listening to Aaron ramble about how cool Mars Psynergy was. Garet only half listened as they walked, his mind on the coming competition.

The week of Trials had just ended, both Isaac and Garet barely even making the cut. Isaac had been able to bypass the qualification rounds last time, due to Babi's complete disregard for his own competition, but Iodem made no such exceptions. Garet had not expected him to. Babi had entered Isaac for his own purposes, and the strange power he wielded caught the other combatants by surprise. If they wanted to win this tournament this year, they would need to prove themselves truly worthy.

The Trials had been fierce, though. Anyone was eligible to join, but only the top seven were selected for Colosso. Garet had spent the past week performing various physical and mental tests, proving himself a valid warrior. Isaac had been lucky to skip them before – Psynergy helped very little.

But his skills had grown, that much was obvious. This year, Isaac had made it through the Trials with no more help from Psynergy than anyone else. It surprised Garet that his friend made it, though; Colosso attracted the fiercest, the bravest, the sturdiest warriors in Weyard. Isaac was a good fighter, to be sure, and a great friend and leader, but Garet never thought him as one of the world's greatest.

Then again, he had never thought the same about himself, either, but he had made it as well. Fighting was his passion, to be sure, but to think that he might be the greatest in the world...

He shook his head. An ego would only cloud his mind now and bring mistakes. He could start thinking about that title once Colosso was over. At the moment, more important things needed to be dealt with.

"So, what kind of food do you want to get?" Garet asked.

A soft hum drifted down to his ears as his brother thought carefully, before being punctuated by a gasp. "Oh! Fried dough!"

Garet groaned. "Aaron, you've had fried dough every day since Colosso started. Eating that much of it isn't good for you."

"But you can only get it during festivals! We almost never have it back home! Please, Garet?"

He heard the slight whimper worm its way into the question and groaned again. "You twist my arm. Fine, we'll get some fried dough."

"Whoo-hoo!"

Stalls covered the center of town, selling everything from food to weapons branded with the official crest of Colosso. Garet eyed these with disdain; their quality made them nothing more than souvenirs, novelties fit for nothing more than display. They were made hastily, with cheap materials, designed to turn as large a profit as possible.

They sold by the dozen, though, a fact which would not have bothered him as much if the buyers did not walk around swinging them blindly. Flimsy and brittle though they might be, they still carried a decent edge. He wondered idly how many people had already been injured by them.

The food, however, more than made up for it. In true festival fashion, grilled meat was never out of sight, and Garet's stomach was never out of an appetite for it. He put Aaron back down as he got him his dough, then stopped at the next stall and got some bear-on-a-stick. Their food in hand, the two began to walk the stalls.

"We should find something nice to bring back for mom and dad," Garet said, eying some of the silk Xian dresses.

"Why didn't they come?" Aaron asked. "Didn't they want to see you win?"

Garet smiled. "I'm sure they did, Aaron, but mom and dad are getting older. They can't run around the world as easily as you and I can. Remember how long we had to travel to reach Kalay? Now, if Piers had been here with his ship, they probably would have come."

"Where is Piers? I liked him. He was cool."

"He's busy in the Great Eastern Sea. He's got some...problems he needs to work out at home." Garet had not even been able to inform Piers of their participation in Colosso. None of them had seen or heard from the man in months. The only indications of his safety were the occasional reports of his ship being spotted in ports. A winged ship drew a lot of attention.

"What about Ivan? I thought you said he'd be here."

Garet laughed. "What, want someone your size around again?" Aaron punched him in the arm with his free hand, making Garet laugh louder. "Ivan should be showing up today. He had to finish some work in Kalay, but he promised he'd be here for the start of the Finals."

Aaron wrinkled his nose. "He's a little weird. Why would you want to work instead of come to a festival?"

"Hey, it's not nice to call people weird. Especially you, weirdo." He tore a chunk of bear off the stick, chewing thoughtfully. "Ivan just takes his work very seriously."

"Sorry. I guess that's a good thing."

Garet did not respond. His mind had drifted to someone else who should be there, even though he knew she had not come. Aaron almost seemed to pick the thought straight from his head, pointing at a flower stall. "Do you think we should get some for Kay?"

Smiling for his brother, Garet looked down. "I don't think the flowers will last long enough to make it back to her, but I'm sure you can bring back stories for her, instead."

Aaron made a face. "We bring those back anyway, though."

"Keep your eyes open, then," Garet said. "Maybe you...we'll find something she'll like."

The boy nodded vigorously as they walked on, Garet trying hard to not look at the flower stalls. Instead, a flash of familiar-looking dark blue hair caught his eye. He tapped Aaron on the shoulder, motioning in the direction of the man. When he turned around, Garet's hunch was confirmed. "Sean!"

The man with the blue hair turned around, a confused look on his face. "You...I know you, but I'm not sure from where."

"Garet Williams. Last year, we met crossing the Karagol on our way to Colosso. Remember? The Kraken?" Garet made a few flailing arm gestures in a poor imitation of tentacles.

Realization washed over Sean's face. "That's right, you were there too! I try not to think about that beast, especially when I'm on a boat. How have things been for you?"

Garet thought about that for a moment. "Well, I've...kept busy for most of the year. How about you?"

"Pretty uneventful," Sean admitted. "Ouranos and I took a short vacation after missing Colosso, then went back to training. It paid off, too. Fourth ranked this year!"

Garet's jaw dropped. "What,? But I haven't seen you at all this week!"

Shrugging, Sean said, "Not too odd. There was an enormous turnout this year." He paused. "Wait. Did you enter?"

Before Garet could respond, Aaron jumped in. "He placed fifth!"

"Congratulations," Sean said, clapping Garet on the shoulder. "I always had you pegged as a great warrior. What about your friend? The champion from last year...Isaac?"

Garet grinned. "He placed seventh. Returning champion, barely making it in. I had to enter to show him how it's *really* done. What about Ouranos? I haven't seen him, either."

"Not this year," he said, sighing. "He injured himself on the first day and dropped out. Bad luck on his part." Sean looked down at Aaron, smiling. "What about this guy? Was he our top placer?"

"Oh! This is my brother, Aaron," Garet said, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "He really wanted to come see Colosso this year. Aaron, this is Sean, a friend I met last year. He helped us beat up some sea monsters."

Aaron's eyes lit up. "Oh, wow, that's so cool! Garet told me about that! Were you the one who beat the Kraken?"

Sean shook his head. "No, that was someone with your brother. Or maybe it *was* your brother."

Garet also shook his head. "Nope, that glory belongs to Ivan."

"...Wait, the small one?"

Holding back a chuckle, Garet nodded. "Yep, him. Turns out Krakens aren't very fond of lightning."

Sean nodded slowly. "That's right, you guys were able to use Psynergy... Well, this year, your advantage is much smaller." Holding his hand at his side, he suddenly curled his fingers into a fist and pulled his arm up, ripping up a chunk of the ground.

Garet grinned. "Glad to see it's spreading to everyone, now."

Laughing, Sean said, "Are you kidding? Psynergy is the entire reason so many people showed up to Colosso this year. The story of the young man who conquered Colosso with a strange and unknown power spread like wildfire. After this release of Alchemy, people understand, and want to see more. They've come from all continents in the hopes of seeing more Psynergy."

"I'll be glad to deliver, then," Garet said, spinning flames around his fingers.

"Of course, what they really want is to learn how to use their own," Sean added. "There's not many people who are experienced in its use. There's some monks over in the east, but other than that, it seems to just be small groups of people."

Garet nodded. "It used to be very localized. Not anymore, though."

Sean grinned. "And a good thing, too."

"Agreed," Garet said. "The more people who can use Psynergy, the less who will be afraid of it."

"So what are you doing right now?" Sean asked, motioning to the empty stick in Garet's hand. "I see you've finished eating."

"Probably heading back to my friends," the redhead said. "Why don't you come by? You could probably convince Isaac to teach you some Venus Psynergy, although you might have to wait until Colosso's over. He's getting awfully competitive about it."

Sean's eyes lit up. "Sure! I'd like to stop by my inn first and grab Ouranos, though. Where are you staying? We can just meet you there."

"Sounds good. We're up in the Tolbi Palace. I'll let the guards know we're expecting you."

"You're staying in the *palace*?"

Garet grinned. "We've got connections to Tolbi's lord. See you later tonight," he said, waving, then taking hold of Aaron's hand.

The small boy looked over his shoulder as they walked away, then turned forward as Sean walked out of sight. "He's really cool. Hey, Garet, tell me the Kraken story again!"

Groaning, Garet said, "Aaron, I've told you that one a bazillion times."

"Yeah, but I really like it. Please?"

"Ugh, stop that! Fine!"

Ivan breathed a sigh of relief as the ship slowly drifted into the Tolbi docks, carefully moving forward through the calm harbor to pull alongside the pier. He stood on the main deck, leaning on the railing, eager to get off. The Karagol had been rough this week, and Ivan had gotten too used to the stability of flying. He'd spent the majority of the trip either in his rack or on the railing, unable to keep much down. Never had he thought the sight of land would bring such relief to him, especially after the previous year.

Down on the pier he watched as several workers lined up along the edge, waiting for the mooring lines. Ivan quickly checked his sides to make sure he was out of the sailors' ways, then resumed his observations. Most of the passengers had returned to their cabins, packing their things, but Ivan had everything in the bag on his back. He was used to traveling light.

Looking out over the docks, he saw several other ships already moored. He had barely made the trip, this ship being the last one. The Colosso Finals started tomorrow, so most people had already shown up, but Ivan simply could not find the time to leave earlier. Too many storerooms to get organized, too many sales to add up, too many items to fit into the budget, too many meetings to schedule... Hammet had to order him to take a vacation.

Ivan smiled at the memory. Ordering was not the right word. Hammet had all of Ivan's notebooks stolen and hidden somewhere, bringing his work to a complete standstill, before he could convince the boy that he deserved some time off. Ivan had still disagreed, arguing that the work needed to get done, but without his books, he had no way to do any of it. Looking back, though, he mentally thanked

Hammet for being so forceful. Even with his constant vomiting since he left Kalay, he found the reprise from his mental stress refreshing. And now he would get to spend the next week with Isaac and Garet, too!

A long, sharp whistle pierced his thoughts, going on for an annoyingly long time. He suspected boatswains practiced their whistle blasts for no reason other than to make them as aggravating as possible. This one was welcome, though, as it accompanied the dropping of the gangplank. Thankful that the ship only carried about a hundred passengers, Ivan reveled in the blessedly short line. He disliked deep water as much as anyone else, but he could never understand why people felt the need to cautiously inch their way down the gangplank, as if the whole thing would collapse with a heavy footfall.

Once on the dock, he began picking his way through the people, searching through the crowd. He was not sure if anyone would meet him here, but he knew how to get to Tolbi in any event. He decided to look around for a few minutes, then if he could not find anyone, he would-

His thoughts were cut short once again by a pair of arms that wrapped themselves around his chest, trapping his arms at his sides. Instantly his hair stood up on end, a soft humming filling the air around him.

"Ivan, wait! It's me!"

The boy's hair flattened again, the growing charge vanishing. "Jenna? Don't surprise me like that!"

The burgundy-haired girl spun him around, a sheepish expression on her face. "Sorry. I wasn't expecting you to react like that. Paranoid much?"

"I told you it would happen. You just didn't listen." Ivan looked around Jenna as he returned the hug, finding Felix standing behind her, shaking his head. "Did you have a good trip, Ivan?"

Ivan shrugged as Jenna let him go. "Eh...it was better than last year. No Kraken attacks."

Felix snorted. "Good. I don't think we need *another* story for Garet to tell every other day."

Leaning forward, Jenna suddenly made a disgusted face. "You and boats still don't get along, I see. Or smell, whatever. Didn't the trip last year give you at least *some* resistance to seasickness?"

He frowned. "Jenna, I spent most of the trip last year lying in my rack, being tended to by Mia after the Kraken poisoned me, waiting for the ship to limp into the docks. Most of that time I was unconscious."

"...Oh. That sucks."

Despite himself, Ivan grinned at her form of apology. "Don't worry, I don't need cheering up. I feel perfectly fine now."

"In that case, let's get going," Felix said. "Do you have everything?"

Ivan nodded, tapping his bag. "Didn't bring much."

"Kraden even got us a carriage for the trip," Jenna said. "Traveling is so much nicer when you don't have to walk."

Sure enough, as they left the docks, a carriage waited for them by the road, two horses grazing contentedly on the grass as the driver waited patiently in his seat. When he saw

them approaching, he quickly jumped out and opened the doors for them. "Are we set to leave, sir?"

"Yes," Felix said as Jenna and Ivan stepped inside. "Straight back to the palace, please." The man bowed and closed the door behind Felix, then stepped back up to his seat and grabbed the reins.

Ivan looked out the window as the carriage rattled and began to move, watching the docks slowly shrink. The carriage bounced softly as it rolled off the cobblestones and onto the dirt road, and the gentle shaking made Ivan drowsy. His eyelids began to droop as he looked out the window, his vision blurring over.

"Ivan?"

His eyes snapped back open and he looked over at Jenna. "Yes?"

The girl's eyebrows were furrowed thoughtfully. "I asked if you were okay."

"Oh, sorry. I'm fine," he said, rubbing his eyes. "I've had a little trouble sleeping the past few nights, that's all."

"Too sick?"

He shrugged. "Partially. I've been having weird dreams for a couple nights, and they keep waking me up."

Felix looked over at him sharply. "Dreams? What kind?"

Ivan shrugged again. "I keep seeing the moon falling. It doesn't make much sense."

The wary look did not leave Felix's face. "Do you think they might be visions of the future?"

"I hope not," Ivan said, shivering. "At least, not in the literal sense. I think they're supposed to symbolize something, but I don't understand them, or even know if its supposed to be the future."

Felix tapped his fingers on his leg thoughtfully. "What if they are literal? Could the moon actually fall like that?"

"I don't know. It hasn't gotten any bigger since I started having them, though. And even if it did, what could we do about it? Something that catastrophic couldn't be stopped."

"That's crap," Jenna said. "I'm sure we could find a way."

Ivan opened his mouth to disagree, but Felix raised a hand. "We can ask Kraden about it when we get back, see if any of his scholars have noticed anything. He has to have a few astronomers in Tolbi somewhere we can ask. I think Ivan's right, though. They probably mean something else. Have you spoken to Hama about them?"

Shaking his head, Ivan said, "They only started a couple nights ago, and I haven't talked to Hama in several months. She's back in Contigo right now."

Felix nodded. "Then there's no sense worrying about them. Their meaning, if there is one, will be clear eventually."

Ivan agreed, but said nothing. He disliked talking about his dreams much, even if these new dreams saved him from his more typical nighttime visitor. The terrifying dread these dreams evoked died off quickly in the waking world, even if the eerie sensation cast shadows that stretched far into the

day. Dwelling on the dreams, however important they might be, was not something he wanted to do.

Instead he asked about Isaac and Garet. Jenna immediately launched into a rant, describing their entire stay in Tolbi so far. She depicted the Colosso Trials in particular detail, including where and what they had eaten each day. "Oh, you should have seen it, Ivan! It was fantastic!"

He smiled. "At least I'll get to see the main event. It starts tomorrow, right?"

"Yep, first thing in the morning. We've already got seats right near the center, so we'll be right there to cheer them on."

Ivan thought about that for a second. "What if they face each other in the first round? I don't know who I would want to win."

Shrugging, Jenna said, "Then we cheer for both, duh. Nothing wrong with that."

As Ivan opened his mouth to respond, the carriage suddenly halted. Jenna looked at him, a puzzled look on his face, so he stuck his head out the open window. In the road ahead of them lay a woman, face-down in the dirt. He threw open the door and jumped out, the driver also getting down, but before he could take another step, a hand grabbed his shoulder.

"Wait," Felix said quietly, looking around.

"Felix, what are you doing?" Jenna asked as she also got out.

Ivan understood, though. He took a few steps forward cautiously, then stopped, staring straight ahead. He inhaled

deeply as he concentrated on the prone form of the woman, blocking out everything else. The color slowly leaked out of the world, leaving everything varying shades of gray, but the woman retained her color. In fact, her colors were so vibrant that they practically glowed against the bleak surroundings, encircling her in an aura.

He stepped back. His eyes left the ground and swept up around them, noting the thick bushes alongside the road. Focusing on them, now, the same vibrant aura glowed straight through them, highlighting the outline of a crouched man. Ivan moved his gaze through more bushes, finding several other men hidden in them.

Satisfied, he closed his eyes and exhaled slowly. When he opened them, the world had returned to its normal coloring. Felix was looking at him expectantly, so he nodded. Felix returned the nod, his hand moving to the sword that rarely left his side, but Ivan shook his head instead.

"We know you're there," he called out, ignoring Felix's frown. "You should just give yourselves up. We don't want trouble."

Silence rang for a few seconds before one of the men emerged from a bush. As he did, the others stood and walked out, all of them with weapons in their hands. The woman picked herself up off the ground as well, revealing a small dagger that had been concealed in her hand. The man who had shown himself first said, "Smart kids. Most people just stop to help the injured lady, but you were more concerned about your own skins. You'll live long."

The words stung Ivan as a double-edged sword. Not only did he realize that Felix had saved him from falling into their trap like a naïve fool, the man's words rang true. Even before he had seen the woman's vibrancy, proving her health, he

had already discarded the thoughts of helping her, merely using his power as a verification.

"However," the man continued, "we've got you outnumbered about three-to-one, I'd say. I wouldn't want to hurt three rich kids and their butler unless I needed to, after all."

Again, Ivan's response was cut short, this time by his burgundy-haired friend shouldering past him to stand in front, placing her hands on her hips. Ivan saw that she carried no weapon, but he knew she did not need one. None of them did, not against these ruffians. "Listen," she said, raising her voice. "You're all going to get out of our way, or I'm going to roast you. Got it?"

Several of them laughed, the woman in particular. "She thinks we'll be a little scared of fire. Girl, you might think you're some hotshot with Psynergy where you come from, but out here in the wild, Psynergy is more powerful than any you've seen!"

Felix snorted. "You people are idiots. Jenna, deal with them, or else I will."

She cast a quick glance at her brother nervously, then nodded, smiling as she said, "Don't worry, I can handle them."

The man in the center shrugged. "If this is how you want it..." He waved his hand and two others stepped forward, pulling flames together into their hands. They swirled briefly, then flew out as a pair of small fireballs.

Jenna raised first an eyebrow, then a hand, as if to catch the flames. Instead of crashing into her hand, though, they simply stretched out and began swirling around it, wreathing her hand in fire. She looked up at the bandits,

grinning madly as the flames began growing. "I'd throw a great fire-themed pun your way right now, but I'm drawing a blank, so instead you get this."

The fire suddenly erupted from where it had been encircling her hand, streaming into the air and snaking around her entire body, whipping her hair all around. As the streak of flame lengthened, she suddenly flicked her hand forward and the flames scattered and condensed in front of her, then erupted once more, flowing forward in one continuous river of fire. It landed on the ground and began to weave itself amongst the bandits, sliding between some, around others, and even between the legs of the two who had originally attacked.

As several of the bandits stumbled away from the flames, the fire coursed back around to their front, suddenly flaring up into the air. It rose into a column, bending forward slightly, and at a silent command from Jenna, two great sheets of flame rose from the sides, curving into the shape of a cobra's hood. The fire completed its transformation as the mouth of the image of the snake opened, sparks spraying to the ground in a roaring hiss.

The Psynergy had the intended effect: the bandits scrambled backwards, tripping over themselves and each other as they tried to put as much distance between them and the Psynergetic projection. Jenna watched them go before gathering the flames together and dispersing them all at once.

She turned back around, satisfied, meeting both a smile and a frown. "What, Felix?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips. "Should I have just killed them instead? Should I have left their charred bodies here as a warning to all other potential bandits?"

His face remained expressionless, a skill Ivan had realized Felix knew as well as he did. "Let's get back in the carriage."

Jenna watched him climb inside, fuming. Ivan opened his mouth to try and calm her down, but she stepped past him and followed Felix inside. The boy sighed. She wanted to make this difficult.

As he climbed inside, he heard her ask, "Are you just going to ignore me? You obviously didn't approve of what I did, so let's hear it."

Felix looked out the window as the carriage began rolling again. "They might have been frightened by you, Jenna, but do you really think that will stop them from robbing others?"

Crossing her arms, Jenna said, "Maybe not. I might not have fixed the problems, but did I make them worse?"

"You might have," Felix said, looking back at her. "You instilled a fear in them, awoken them to the possibility that their victims might be more capable than them with Psynergy. Now they might just skip over the warning and kill people outright. Even the most skilled Adept can't use Psynergy if he's dead."

Jenna frowned, and Ivan could clearly see it had not occurred to her. Granted, it had not even occurred to him; Felix had a gift for seeing possible consequences much more clearly than the rest of them. "Then what should I have done, then?" she asked. "Don't you dare say I should have killed them all, Felix. Don't you even think about it."

Felix shook his head. "You shouldn't have just frightened them off. You should have driven it home for them to stop, to never do it again."

"And how should I have done that?" Jenna said, her voice rising. "Told them I would hunt them down if they did it again? Do you think they would have believed I was capable of it?"

Something clicked in Ivan's head and the answer to Felix's riddle fell into place. "No," he said softly. "They wouldn't have."

Jenna smiled humorlessly. "See? Ivan ag-"

"Not you, at least," he continued, cutting her off. "But they would have believed it of me. I was the one who could tell the woman was fine, that they were hiding in the bushes. Jupiter Psynergy isn't well-known. If I'd made the threat, they probably would have believed my apparent clairvoyance would actually let me follow up on it."

Felix nodded. "It's not about truth, it's about what people believe. You moved fire and scared them because you were much better at it, but Ivan saw through their lies and found the truth. That scared them because they didn't know how he did it. Remember how much any Psynergy used to frighten non-Adepts? You used that fear of the unknown on visitors to Vale when you were younger."

Jenna turned slightly pink. "That was just a kid's game, though."

"Children's games often teach important lessons that you won't consciously recognize until you're older."

Ivan looked down. "This is my fault. I should have...I don't know, I should have done something, instead of just stand there."

Felix shook his head again. "No, you can't blame yourself for not seeing an opportunity like that. I didn't even realize it until they were running, and I was furious as myself for it. I was the one who told Jenna to deal with it, though. The fault is mine."

"Oh, stop playing the blame game," Jenna said. "What's done is done, and there's no changing it."

"True enough, I suppose," Felix said, leaning back in his seat. "It's easy to say what we should have done after it's all over."

"I guess he was right, then," Ivan said after a few minutes of silence.

"Who?"

"The Wise One. He told us people would try to use Alchemy for selfish purposes."

"We already knew that was the case," Felix said. "Even before the beacons were lit, Babi was scrambling to grab what he could. We were right, as well."

Ivan raised an eyebrow. "About what?"

"That we were dedicated to keeping the world safe," Jenna said quietly. "That we would stop people like that, people who would try and put others or the world in danger with Alchemy...no matter who it was."

Felix reached over and gently touched her leg. "Jenna..." She shook off his hand and turned towards the window, falling silent.

Ivan winced inwardly; he should not have brought that up. He did not need to read minds to figure out how Jenna felt about that night. Unfortunately, the damage had been done and it was too late to retract his statement. Ivan mouthed a silent apology at Felix, but the other man just waved his hand slightly, telling him to forget it.

Leaning his head against the side of the carriage, he felt the heavy weight settle over his eyes once more, but this time, no concerned questions woke him back up.

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When the carriage arrived at the palace, Felix leaned over and shook Ivan lightly. His eyes snapped open and his head jumped up, but the boy quickly calmed down as he fully woke up. Felix looked over at Jenna and found her grabbing her bag from underneath the seat. She had not slept on the road, like him, but simply stared out the window in silence. He did not worry about it; the jubilation of the onset of the Colosso Finals would restore her spirits quickly.

The door opened and Felix climbed down, turning around to help the other two out. He thanked the driver as Ivan looked around. "Wow, Kraden's made some renovations. Is this road new?"

Felix nodded. "He felt it was too barren and isolated. Probably just the way Babi wanted it." He inclined his head as they walked past the guards, who held the doors open for them. "Jenna, would you take Ivan up to his room?"

Ivan stopped and looked back at him. "You're not coming with us?"

Shaking his head, Felix said, "No. Kraden wanted to know when you got in. Everyone else should be in either Garet or

Isaac's room. I'll be up in a short while."

Jenna grabbed Ivan's hand and began tugging. "Come on, Isaac and Garet are gonna be so happy you came. Isaac started to wonder, but I kept reassuring him you'd be here..."

Her voice trailed off as they turned the corner. Felix watched down the hallway for a few more seconds, making sure Jenna was actually headed in the direction of the guest rooms, then turned around and headed for Kraden's study.

The old man had done well with the place, Felix had to admit. The last time the Valeans had visited was shortly after the end of their quest, in order to see Kraden home safely. It had been Felix's first visit to a Lord's palace and he had not been impressed. It struck him more as an interconnected series of dungeon cells, with the sole exception of the alchemical lab in the basement.

Now, though, the palace had been redone with much detail. Beautiful tapestries covered many of the walls, brought from various places around the world. Windows had been opened in several of the walls, taking advantage of Tolbi's moderate climate to introduce a breath of fresh air to the palace, literally. It showed in the servants and scholars who lived and worked there, as well. They smiled much more now, and were always cheerful and willing when he needed help with something.

It was not hard for Felix to guess who had initiated the decoration of the basement lab.

Knocking on the study door, he heard a voice younger than expected call out for him to enter. When he stepped inside, he found Iodem at the desk instead. "Oh, good evening Felix. Can I help you with anything?"

"Actually, I was looking for Kraden. Have you seen him?" he asked.

Iodem sighed in response. "He's down in the lab, tinkering with something or other. One of the scholars came up, babbling excitedly, and Kraden immediately rushed off after him. I swear, he's like a child when it comes to Alchemy."

Smiling, Felix said, "Everyone has their passions. It's why the people like him so much, though."

"True," Iodem admitted. "His mind sees uses for Alchemy in everything, and the people love his strange inventions."

Felix nodded to the other man. "Well, thank you, Iodem. I'll let you get back to work." Closing the door behind him, he paused for a moment to remember the way to the lab, then set off.

Kraden inheriting Lordship of Tolbi had been quite the shock to the old man, and had it not been Iodem giving it up to him, he probably would have rejected it. Neither man was well-suited to run Tolbi; Iodem was too closely associated with Babi in the public's eye, who had fallen out of favor in his final years, especially with their southern neighbor of Lalivero. Kraden, while more distant, having had little interaction with the public, had little experience in running a city. His knowledge of Alchemy was second to none, making him well-suited for educating people on their new lifestyles, but more often than not the man simply wanted to experiment with what Felix thought of as his new toys.

Eventually the two had come to the agreement that Iodem would remain Chief Minister to Kraden, while Kraden would serve as a figurehead of sorts. The arrangement worked out surprisingly well, especially once Kraden started presenting his useful findings to the public. His demonstration of the

distillation of water from the Karagol, in particular, producing clean, fresh water lit a fire of excitement in the public. Iodem immediately began hiring engineers for the creation and construction of a distillation machine to provide a steady source of drinkable water, even during the typical summer drought.

Since then, Kraden's support as Lord of Tolbi had cemented itself. Kraden had proven himself able to promise progress and then deliver on it, one reason why Felix was unsurprised to find Kraden leaning over a younger scholar's notebook when he arrived in the lab, eagerly pointing and jabbering away.

"This ravine here would be perfect," Felix heard the man saying. "Yes, wound right through here, and we would need very few landscape alterations."

"Planning new roads?" Felix asked, stepping beside him.

Kraden looked up at the sound of his voice and smiled. "Better than roads, Felix: channels. Look here."

He glanced down at the notebook and saw a sketch of some mountainous terrain, water on either side. "What is this?"

"The mountains on the southeastern coast of the Karagol," Kraden explained. "We've been searching for a way to circumvent the Suhalla Desert and get to Lalivero and the Great Eastern Sea. Eventually we decided to try and create a man-made river straight from the Karagol to the ocean."

"How would you do that?" Felix asked.

Kraden's eyes twinkled. "With help from you, and those like you, of course."

Raising an eyebrow, Felix said, "You want to move the land with Venus Psynergy?"

The old man nodded. "Look at Kalay. Hammet's city flourished because he was able to establish easily traveled trade routes along the Silk Road. Before the decline of Alchemy, all the cities on the Great Eastern Sea traded frequently with each other and prospered greatly. I want to enable that once more."

Realization dawned on Felix. "You intend to create more sailing ships."

"At first, yes," Kraden said. "Sailing ships move much faster than rowing ones, which are too slow to effectively trade across the ocean."

Felix thought about that for a moment. "You've already begun research into ships powered by Psynergy, then."

"Exactly." Kraden clapped once, his excitement obviously building. Felix suspected the man missed their discussions, and with a soft pang, he realized that he did as well. "Ships that flow on the natural energy of the world, propelled by only the thoughts of the captain. They are the future!"

"Your research would be made easier with a subject to study," Felix mused. "Have you contacted Piers? I'm sure he would let you study his ship, at least for a time."

Kraden's face fell. "Unfortunately, I can't seem to get hold of him. I send messages to the towns that he's been moored in, but they always get there late. The man is infuriatingly restless, I swear."

Chuckling, Felix gently slapped his hand onto the scholar's shoulder. "Just think, though. If he wins out and can make

his case, you might be able to simply learn from Lemuria."

"If they still even know," Kraden grumbled, then took off his glasses, cleaning them on his shirt. "Oh, Felix. I think I'm getting too old for all this excitement. Too much more, and I'll be nothing more than an angry badger who yells at kids from my rocking chair."

"So you get a nice chair, then," Felix said with a shrug.

Kraden laughed, causing several of the scholars to look over in annoyance. "Ah, it is good to have you back, Felix. Come, let's get out of here. I need time to let my thoughts turn over."

"Ivan's here, now," Felix said as they left the lab. "He mentioned that he's been having some dreams lately. The same one, actually."

"Oh? Are they more prophecies?"

Felix hesitated. "I don't know. He said that in them, the moon crashed into Weyard. Have you heard of anything strange?"

Kraden hummed softly, thinking about the question. "No," he said at last. "Nothing relevant, at least. Rumors of more pirate raiders in the east, whereas the Kimbobo finally seem to have calmed down. The Taklamakan Desert and Mogall Forest are receding slowly."

Nodding, Felix said, "I didn't think it was literal, but I told him I'd check with you."

"I'll have someone take a look at it," Kraden promised. "In the meantime, though, let's relax a bit. It's your first Colosso, so you should be enjoying it."

"Never been a big fan of festivals, Kraden. You know that."

Sighing, the man said, "Yes, I remember you stubbornly refusing to participate in absolutely *anything* in Izumo. You will be watching the Finals at least, though?"

"Of course," Felix said. "I'm interested to see how well Isaac and Garet do."

Kraden looked over at him slyly. "You don't expect them to win, do you?"

Felix shook his head. "No, I don't. With the ability to use Psynergy comes defense against it, which was the only reason Isaac won last year. They're both good fighters, but these gladiators have been training for longer."

Kraden merely shrugged. "I suppose it all depends on how much you think the difference in physical prowess compares to the difference in Psynergetic prowess."

"Well, what do you think, then?"

The old man shrugged again. "I couldn't say either way. It's part of the reason I'm eagerly awaiting the fights, actually. I'm very interested to find out the answer."

Grinning as they reached Garet's door, Felix said, "The curiosity of the scientific mind knows no rest."

"Neither does the mouth of the young," Kraden shot back.

Both stopped as they opened the door and found Garet holding Ivan in a headlock, the smaller boy squirming fiercely as he tried to escape. He stopped at the sight of Felix and Kraden and meekly asked, "Help?"

The smell of roasted pork drifted in through the crack at the bottom of Isaac's door, rising up and casually permeating throughout the room, gradually reaching his nostrils. His nose twitched once, then his eyes fluttered open slowly. Mind lagging the body, he sat up in a sleepy haze, his half-open eyes scanning the dark room.

Stepping out of his bed, he pulled on a shirt and his boots, fumbling with the laces for a short while, then entered the hallway. Turning his head left and right, sniffing at the air, he continued in the direction of the freshly cooked meat, waking up more and more as he walked.

A few more turns found him the dining room, where the smell of potatoes and eggs joined with the more powerful aroma of meat. Across the room, a small blond boy worked at the fire, poking at the meat. Isaac smiled. "They do have cooks here, you know."

The chef jumped, his head snapping around so fast Isaac could swear he heard a *crack*. "Isaac! Good Gods, you scared me!"

The older blond grinned. "Sorry. Didn't mean to."

Ivan placed a hand on his chest, taking a deep breath. "No, it's not your fault. It's just been so quiet in here."

"Yeah, I noticed the general emptiness of the palace right now," Isaac said, sitting down at the table. "What time is it?"

Ivan gestured toward a window with his cooking fork, where the sky had just begun to fade from black to blue. "Early. Dawn's about an hour off." He turned back and pulled a pot from the fire telekinetically, setting it onto a nearby table.

Frowning, Isaac said, "What are you doing up already?"

Grabbing a knife, Ivan began dicing up the potatoes. "Making breakfast."

"Ivan, the palace has several cooks who do that."

There was a brief pause as the knife continued to chatter away. "...I couldn't sleep."

Isaac nodded. "Karst?"

The knife stopped. "...Yeah." A few seconds later it swept the diced pieces into a bowl, then began the continuous chopping again. "I didn't want to sit in the dark after that."

Isaac could find nothing to say for a few moments. It was partly his fault, after all. "The food smells good. It actually woke me up."

"That's how you know it's good, when it can get *you* out of bed."

Recognizing Garet's voice, Isaac turned his head and raised an eyebrow as his friend walked in, fully dressed. "What are you trying to say?"

Garet snorted, sitting down across from Isaac. "I'm saying your laziness is even more legendary than you are. I'm lucky if you usually get up before noon. It's a testament to Ivan's cooking, really."

Ivan shrugged, sweeping the last of the potatoes into the bowl and grabbing some spices. "Breakfast isn't very hard, it's usually fairly simple."

"Quit selling yourself short, Ivan," Isaac said. "Cooking always takes skill. Remember when Garet made breakfast?"

That brought a chuckle from Ivan as Garet slammed his fist into the table, then pointed at Isaac. "Hey! I've gotten better! And I didn't have as good control over my Psynergy then!"

"Garet, you tried to roast that meat with a stream of flame," Ivan said with a small smile. "The inside was still completely uncooked."

"With the outside completely blackened, mind you," Isaac added, grinning openly.

The redhead crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair. "Whatever. I just underestimated how powerful I was, that's all."

"Like that time I asked you to boil the water?" Ivan asked.

"How was I supposed to know you wanted a fire *underneath* the pot?"

"You blasted the water directly," Ivan said flatly. "What did you expect to happen?"

"The water to magically transform into delicious food," Garet said in the same tone.

Ivan rolled his eyes. "We're lucky Isaac banned you from making anything else without my supervision. I can only imagine how it would have gone. 'Oop! Excuse me, Saturos, but I have a very *pressing* issue. Can you hold on a minute?'"

Isaac laughed as Garet crossed his arms and mumbled something under his breath.

Ivan stopped his preparations and glanced over his shoulder. "What was that, Garet?" he said slowly.

Garet tapped his fingers on the table before saying, "Nothing."

"I don't think that was it," Ivan said, turning back to the fire. "Don't forget the rules, now."

Tapping his fingers again, Garet said louder, "I told you to shut up."

The cooking fork was thrust into the air. "Victory, Ivan."

"Whatever," Garet said. "I'll get you next time. I'm at my weakest when I'm hungry."

"Well, I wouldn't want to beat you unless you were at your best," Ivan said, turning around with two plates, food stacked on each. He walked over to the table and placed them before his two friends. "And neither should anyone else. Eat up, you'll need your strength."

After getting a plate for himself, Ivan held his hands out and began drawing the air from the fireplace, shrinking the fire a considerable amount. Once satisfied with the heat output, he turned and walked back to the table, sitting beside Isaac.

They ate in silence for several minutes before Garet suddenly asked, "Hey, is there more?"

Ivan looked over at his plate in surprise. "Good Gods, you inhaled that!"

"I have a big appetite," Garet said with a shrug. "If there's not, then that's fine."

Shaking his head, Ivan said, "No, no, there's plenty. I knew you'd eat a lot, I just didn't expect you to eat it that fast." He picked up Garet's plate and walked over to the food, turning back around as Kraden walked in. "Good morning, Kraden."

"Good morning, boys," he said, eying the food. "Was this a private meal for our Colosso warriors?"

"Of course not," Ivan said, pulling out another chair. "Please, have a seat and eat. I made more than enough."

Kraden smiled as a plate was sat down in front of him, thanking Ivan. He took a single bite and groaned in pleasure. "Ivan, you have no idea how much I have missed your cooking. You put all my chefs to shame."

The boy's face turned pink as he sat back down. "Please, Kraden, it's nothing special."

"Nonsense," the old man said. "There is always room for you here, should you ever decide to leave Hammet's employ."

By the time Felix and Jenna arrived, Isaac and Garet had finished eating. "Sorry," Isaac said. "We've got to be there by dawn."

Felix raised an eyebrow. "You seem quite confident in your abilities."

A confused look came over Isaac's face, causing Jenna to giggle. "Your clothes, Isaac."

He looked down, suddenly remembering he still wore the pajama bottoms and the shirt he threw on, while Garet was

fully dressed, save for his weapon and armor. "Right, forgot about that. I'll be a second, Garet."

Isaac returned several minutes later, this time wearing actual clothes. "Much better," Felix commented. "How on Weyard did you win this thing last year, again?"

Grinning sheepishly, Isaac said, "Same way I'll win it this year."

Garet suddenly let out a cough, one that sounded suspiciously like "luck". By the time Isaac had turned to him, though, he had straightened up with a smile on his face. "Well, oh great champion, shall we leave?"

Ivan giggled this time, quickly clapping his hands over his mouth as everyone looked at him. "What was *that?*" Felix asked.

"For a minute there, I thought Aaron had gotten up," Garet said. "Then I remembered that he's almost as lazy as Isaac, and I got confused. I could have sworn he was the only ten-year-old boy with us."

"Shut up, Garet," Ivan said, his face reddening. He then pointed at him furiously. "No! That doesn't count!"

"Eat it," Garet said, grinning wildly. "Now we're even."

Isaac rolled his eyes. "Come on, you're the one that said we need to go."

"Wise decision," Kraden said. "If you don't leave now, Colosso will end before these two finish this."

"Good luck, both of you," Jenna said, sitting down with her food. "We'll be there in a little bit."

Isaac and Garet waved to them as they walked out, leaving the palace. The sky had begun to brighten with the coming sun, enough for Isaac to see the clear sky. The morning air was cool and crisp, but he expected it to heat up to a pleasant temperature before the first match. He was not sure which one he would have, but the matches were scheduled to avoid high noon, to prevent too much interference from the midday sun. Even with the climate conditioning most Colosso participants from cooler areas underwent, few could handle the brutal rays of direct sunlight near the equator, even if it was winter.

As they walked, he noticed the streets were already bustling with vendors setting up their stalls, ready for a long day of sales. Most souvenirs had been swapped out for food and drink, recognizing that most people wanted to see the Finals, not go shopping.

Not all of the early risers were vendors, though. People had risen early, eager to get what they wanted before others could buy it all. Those who had not bought reserved seats in the colosseum arrived early in the morning to grab good seats, only to find out they had already been taken by those who had simply camped out the night before.

And of course, there were the children of those parents who neglected to realize that the earlier one sends a child to bed, the earlier that child will rise. Kids ran through the streets in droves, reminding Isaac of the wild gnomes on the roads, skittering about without noticing anyone until they nearly ran into them.

One such boy, his sight focused on his friends well ahead of him, crashed directly into Isaac. The child bounced off his leg and fell to the ground, but when Isaac helped him back up, he gaped. "You're Isaac!"

Grinning, Isaac ruffled the boy's hair. "Yep, that's me. Are you going to be watching today?"

"You bet!" the boy shouted, nearly leaping into the air. "You're my hero! Are you gonna win Colosso again this year?"

Isaac laughed. "Of course I will, just for you."

The boy's grin, already stretching across his entire face, somehow grew even wider. "Oh man, my friends will be so jealous I got to meet you!"

"Well, you'd better go catch up to them, then," Isaac said. "Otherwise they'll leave you behind."

"Oh!" Looking around in surprise, the boy waved at Isaac before taking off. "Bye Isaac! Thanks!"

Isaac waved him off, then looked over at Garet, who had an amused expression on his face. "What?"

Garet shook his head, grinning. "Man, you've even got your own little fan club. I'm surprised they aren't selling yellow scarves here."

Turning slightly red, Isaac's hands unconsciously moved to adjust the scarf that he had not worn. "Actually...they are. I saw some a couple days ago."

Garet burst into laughter, prompting a quick thump on his shoulder. "Sorry, sorry, but I was being sarcastic. I didn't actually think they'd be selling them..."

A silence fell between them, yet neither young man felt the need to break it. They continued on through the waking town as the sun finally peaked over the Karagol in the east,

coating the water in a brilliant yellow sheen. The break of dawn was accompanied by a bell ringing through Tolbi twice, then stopping.

The number of people grew as they approached the colosseum, until eventually they were practically pushing their way through the crowd to reach the front gates. After a few of the guards recognized them as gladiators, they began to clear a path for them, ushering them inside quickly.

Once inside, Isaac exhaled deeply. "Wow. What a turnout already."

Garet shrugged. "Sean did say that a lot of people came to see Psynergy." He looked around him, surveying the courtyard. "Well, speak of the devil. He beat us here."

Isaac followed his gaze and found Sean waving at them, so they moved over towards him. "Are you ready for this, Garet?" Sean asked.

"Course I am," he said, grinning.

Sean looked at Isaac, who shrugged, beginning to feel the first traces of nerves creeping down his back. "Once again, I feel...well, small. Everyone here is huge. Even Garet is almost as big as the regular gladiators."

Flexing his enormous muscles, Garet said, "The ultimate combination of mind and matter. My victory is all but secured."

Sean laughed, clapping them both on the shoulders. "You should lend some of that confidence to Isaac. He looks like he needs it."

Isaac smiled, standing up straighter. "No way. I've done it before, I can do it again. I've got the advantage of experience, this year."

Nodding, Sean said, "That's more like it. Good luck, both of you. May you fight with the strength of the colossus."

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"And here comes our first gladiator into the arena, finishing the course in a fantastic time."

Jenna screamed at the top of her lungs as Isaac stepped up onto the raised platform, pausing for a moment to raise his hands in victory before stooping to pick up the gauntlets on the ground, ignoring the leather gloves. The stands exploded in cheers similar to Jenna's as he slipped them on over his hands.

And to think, she had a perfect seat for the fight. Kraden had done them a great service and reserved them the booth right next to his seat, which sat in the center of the arena. Jenna could practically see the sweat glistening on Isaac's forehead.

"He looks in pretty good condition," Ivan shouted over the din.

Jenna nodded, pulling Aaron off of the stone railing for the third time. "Stop climbing there and just stand on this torch stand! I put it here for a reason, you know!"

The boy grumbled something inaudible and balanced himself on it once more, pouting at Jenna, who simply made a face back, before the sound of Iodem's voice called her attention to the arena once more.

"And here comes our other gladiator, slightly behind, but having grabbed a few more of our hidden surprises on the way!"

The gladiator inclined his head to Isaac, who stood waiting patiently at the other side, then pulled on his gloves and drew his sword. Isaac matched the movement and stood in a ready stance.

"Are you ready?" Iodem asked the crowd. "Colosso Finals, round one, match one! Isaac Chayan versus Buford Temblin! *Begin!"*

Isaac and Buford immediately stepped forward, their swords flashing against each other as the stands exploded in cheers once more. It quickly became clear to Jenna that Buford had the upper hand in the fight, not only having more strength than Isaac, but also a longer reach and better technique. After only a few seconds, it looked as if the match would be over already, Buford striking what would be a winning blow with his tournament blade.

Instead of meeting with Isaac's chest, though, a stalagmite abruptly rose from the ground between the two, deflecting Buford's blade. The wave of sound peaked again at the sudden appearance of Psynergy, several people trying to start up a chant of Isaac's name.

The young man took advantage of his slight opening and thrust his hand forward. The ground along the arena floor cracked and split, pieces of rock jutting upward around Buford's feet. The other gladiator seemed to have expected the tactic, though, as he began stepping his way through the torn ground slowly, carefully positioning his feet to maintain a strong stance.

Isaac charged back at him regardless, the rocks melding back into the ground where he stepped, but Buford held his ground. Their blades clashed several more times, but this time Buford ended with the surprise. Pushing Isaac back, a new stalagmite suddenly rose behind the younger warrior. He smashed into it rather solidly, causing Jenna to wince.

"Come on Isaac!" she shouted. "Show him how to do it!"

Whether he heard her or not, she could not say, but he seemed to have realized his disadvantage as well. When Buford came forward for another attack, Isaac held up one of his hands to the side. Buford's blade, aimed for Isaac's head, suddenly diverted and crashed into the steel gauntlet. Without bothering to even close his hand around the blade, Isaac dragged it further down and struck with his own.

With his own blade trapped, Buford hopped to the side, dodging Isaac's sword, but refused to let go of his own. A few more swipes met the same fruitless end, before Buford's empty hand suddenly shot out and seized Isaac's wrist. Using his superior strength, Buford forced Isaac back up against the stalagmite, slowly forcing his arm backwards.

It was not until he stepped up onto the arena platform that Jenna noticed the third man, a long cloak covering his entire body, even in this heat. Isaac and Buford noticed him at the same time, their one-sided wrestle for control suddenly halting. The crowd quieted down as everyone suddenly noticed the man, seemingly simultaneously.

"Guards!" Iodem roared, standing up immediately. "Remove this man from the arena at once!"

Jenna heard the sound of familiar laughter from underneath the man's hood as several Tolbi soldiers ran towards him,

followed by an even more familiar voice. "Haven't we had this discussion before?"

She had already leaped off the balcony as the man spun to face his attackers, sweeping a hand outward. A fierce gust of wind suddenly tore the soldiers from their feet, hurling them into the walls. She heard Felix and Ivan land behind her as she sprinted for the central platform, the man's hood falling away as he spun.

"Alex!"

A swirl of his fingers turned the sandy arena floor to a thick, viscous mud, causing Jenna's momentum to carry her into the ground with a loud 'plop'. She watched as Ivan rushed past her on one side, his feet barely grazing the soft ground, while Felix sprinted by on the other, the ground re-hardening beneath his feet.

As she pulled herself back up, she watched as the great slab of earth Felix pulled from the ground dissolved into sand as it approached Alex. Ivan's burst of lightning stopped short as the sand reformed into a barrier beside Alex, taking the blow.

"Ah, Felix," Alex said softly. "Pardon me, I'll only be a minute." He pointed his hands at Felix and Ivan, then lowered them swiftly. Instantly Ivan collapsed face-down into the mud, while Felix fell to a knee, struggling to hold himself up.

Jenna looked at them, then at Alex. "Alex! You...!"

His eyes swiveled to her, a smile forming on his face. "I am sorry for this, Jenna, but I need this more than he does." Raising a hand up, the mud around Jenna suddenly swirled

up around her, pinning her arms to her side as it froze over and encased her in a cocoon of permafrost.

Alex turned to Isaac and Buford, who had separated, though he ignored Buford as if the man was not present. "Isaac... Please, don't take this personally. You just have something I need."

"What are you-"

His question became a startled oath as his gauntlets suddenly swung behind his back, clamping together. Buford jumped at Alex, his dulled sword ready to at least injure the blue-haired man, but Alex simply held out a hand to him. Buford's shadow leaped from the ground and crashed into the airborne gladiator, picking him up from his path and depositing him on the ground behind the platform.

Horrified, Jenna could do nothing but watch as Alex approached Isaac. As he reached a hand out to him, the hair on the back of her neck pricked up. With no more warning than Alex's appearance in the arena, something exploded in front of her. It destroyed her prison and threw her away, depositing her back in the mud.

As she picked herself back up, her entire front stinging, she found the arena eerily silent. Only after she noticed Alex's mouth moving did she realize the blast had temporarily deadened her sense of hearing. Across the arena, a great, white bolt smashed into the stands, obliterating what it struck and sending stone and people flying from around it.

She raised her face to the sky and found it completely covered in thick, black clouds that swirled restlessly. Born from them were the enormous bolts of lightning, raining down all around them. Jenna lowered her gaze back to the arena floor and found Alex staring up into the sky, a furious

expression on his face, his hands weaving back and forth. Isaac had slipped around him and made it to Ivan, while Buford had helped Felix up, Alex's Psynergy apparently dispelled.

Jenna waved them towards her, pointing to one of the ground entrances, when suddenly she remembered Aaron, Kraden, and Iodem. Casting a glance up towards their seats, she found them empty, but undamaged. They had escaped, then. As the others ran past her, she looked one last time into the arena. Alex stood in the center of a maelstrom of minute Psynergetic particles, his eyes closed as the raw elemental energy swirled around him.

A hand grabbed hers and pulled, so she tore her eyes away from the man and ran into the chaos.

Chapter 2: Decisions

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 2 – Decisions

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The clouds raced by overhead at impossible speeds, sending shadows surging across the ground like waves. Wind buffeted the long grass all around Ivan as he waded through the waist-high growth, his hands caressing it absently.

The wind called him forward, whispering his name as it ran past him. He glanced around in a daze, but saw nothing other than the endless sea of grass. His feet moved of their own accord, their actions nothing more than a mild distraction. Serenity claimed his mind and silenced his worries, leading him on and on.

The grass parted without warning and Ivan stepped into a small clearing. Glancing behind him, he could see his path clearly; the grass had not budged from where it had been displaced. When he reached out to try and touch it, though, he found his hand come up short. Walking towards it had no effect; he simply walked in place, never getting any closer.

His confusion lasted only moments. By the time he turned back toward the clearing, the oddity had been forgotten. The clearing itself lay empty, save for himself and two paths on the other side. As he approached them, he could see a person on either path, walking away.

On one walked Mia, her blue hair easily distinguishable from a distance. His mouth opened to call out to her when he recognized the person on the opposite path as himself. The words died in his mouth as he looked down, finding nothing where his body should have been.

Returning his gaze to the distant figures, Ivan watched as the sky suddenly blackened with clouds and crackled with lightning. As he looked on, the paths diverged more and more, until they lay on either side of him, instead of ahead.

Again the wind whipped up, swirling around him viciously. Again it spoke a single word, though it did not whisper this time. As Ivan turned his head from left to right, the wind roared in his ears, howling its only message.

"*Choose!"*

- \/\/ -

"Hey, Sheba! Sheba! Come here!"

The girl groaned as she turned around, practically dragging her feet across the floor. "What?"

Another girl, slightly younger than she, pointed at some markings on the wall. "What does this mean?"

Sheba looked at the wall and examined an engraving of birds at the top of the picture, people covering their heads at the bottom, and vertical lines between them. "...It means that people hundreds of years ago didn't like being pooped on by birds, either."

The other girl huffed and crossed her arms, causing Sheba to grin, but a soft knock on the head removed it just as quickly. Sheba turned around to find her instructor standing behind

her, a disapproving frown on her face. "What have I told you about being sarcastic?"

"That every time I am, somewhere, a monster disembowels an annoying child?"

Thump.

"How about that it makes my head stronger?"

Miss Tamara sighed. "Sheba, is it so difficult to answer a question seriously?"

Placing her hands on her hips, Sheba said, "I was being serious. I have no idea what that picture means, and that's the best guess I have."

"You don't think it might have any historical or cultural significance?" she asked, staring pointedly at the girl.

"I prefer to think outside the box," Sheba replied, returning the gaze.

The woman stared at her for a few more moments, then shook her head. "Sheba, I brought you because I thought you'd be able to provide valuable insight for the other children about the lighthouse from your experience, maybe even explain some things the scholars don't know yet. Why are you being so troublesome?"

Sheba looked away. "I'm just in a bad mood today."

"Today? You've been like this since you returned home."

Throwing up her hands in frustration, Sheba turned back around. "You want a realistic explanation? Fine." Walking over to the drawing again, she slapped her hand one of the

birds. "*In my experience,* birds are the representation of the wind, or the power of Jupiter. They show up in carvings in every lighthouse, but most prominently in Jupiter Lighthouse. The people of Contigo, descendants of the Jupiter Clan of Anemos, use many bird-themed designs to this day. Their leader is even titled Quetzalcoatl, after the mythical winged serpent."

Her hand moved to the people. "On the other hand, people represent the earth, Venus. Images of people, usually Adepts, feature in every lighthouse, but only in Venus are they absolutely *everywhere.* This is more difficult to prove, since humans can represent any element, not just Venus...but I'd bet that I'm right."

Finally, her hand circled over the lines between the two. "And this...is probably the Jupiter Clan beating the crap out of the Venus Clan. Jupiter and Venus hold an opposing relationship in Alchemy, so it's entirely likely the two clans were not very friendly. Add to that how we know Alchemy's seal was preceded by a great war, and the picture makes perfect sense – a warning for Venus Adepts to watch the skies for attacks by the enemy."

Stepping away, she crossed her arms again. "Or in simpler terms, telling people to watch out for bird crap." She turned around and walked out of the chamber without waiting for a response, emerging into the sunlight and immediately turning to the side. She heard footsteps behind her, but ignored them until she reached the elevator on the lighthouse's side. "I don't want company," she said, stepping up onto the platform.

As she reached for the controls, though, she heard the faintest of sniffles. Her curiosity forced her to glance back

and she found her little brother standing there. "Oh...Javen. I didn't- Would you like to see the top of the lighthouse?"

Javen looked at the entrance, then back at his sister. "Didn't Miss Tamara say to stay with her?"

Sheba shook her head, holding out her hand. "Don't worry. I know more about this place than she does."

He nodded, taking her hand as she pulled him up, then stood him in the center. "Stay here. Don't go near the edges, and don't let go of my hand." She turned back to the controls and pressed a large, stone button. A click could be heard from within the machinery before the elevator rumbled once, then began to rise. Javen wobbled unsteadily for a moment, then grabbed hold of Sheba with his other hand until he found his balance.

As they rose, Sheba turned and looked out. Already she could see the ocean at the base of the cliff, the empty space where land had once been slowly becoming more natural to think of. There had been initial worries that the cliff would continue to collapse and plunge Venus Lighthouse into the sea, only further reinforced by the loss of most of the tunnels that led to the lighthouse proper, leaving the entrance sitting atop a sheer drop to the ocean below.

At Sheba's request, though, Felix examined the area with his Psynergy and confirmed for her that the lighthouse held a strong grip on its base. Upon hearing the report from Sheba, Lalivero immediately began construction on a series of wooden walkways along the cliff, not only allowing access to the lighthouse, but also reconnecting the road from Suhalla.

Most of the land around had been left unchanged, though. A new bridge had been constructed over the river leaving the Red Lake during the road restoration project. During her

several visits to the lighthouse over the last year, the bridge had become one of her favorite points. Constructed just before the river became a great waterfall, it not only had a fantastic view of the ocean and cliffs but also of the furious rapids that passed beneath it. On some days, the mist rising up from the waterfall would even make a rainbow, a rare sight in Lalivero.

With a whir, the elevator slowed, then stopped with a light bump. Sheba picked up Javen as she walked along the floating pathway, only placing him down once she reached the solid aerie.

"Wow..." the boy whispered, shielding his eyes against Venus' bright light. The beacon swirled silently in the center of the aerie, casting a brilliant glow across it and tinting everything yellow.

Sheba glanced up at the beacon, also. The last time here, she had felt nothing from the sphere of pure Venus energy, but this time, she felt its touch on her mind, draining her power. Granted, the last time she had seen the beacon this close, she had little experience with Psynergy and little power to drain. Or perhaps it had been because she had been clinging to life, rather literally.

She pulled Javen over to a ledge, although one with a lower area; while heights did not bother her, she had no desire to repeat such a fall. Sitting down and dangling her legs over the edge, Sheba leaned back on her hands as she looked out.

"Why were you so angry?" Javen asked quietly.

Sheba looked at him for a moment, then smiled and placed her arm around his shoulder, pulling him close. "They were annoying me with their questions."

Javen looked down at the folded hands in his lap. "I'm sorry for asking them."

She shook her head, surprised. "No, Javen, you weren't annoying me." She thought for a moment. "I guess...it wasn't really the questions. I just haven't been feeling good lately. It put me in a bad mood."

"Are you sick?"

Smiling at the concern in his voice, she shook her head again. "No, not sick. I don't really know the word for it, but I miss my friends."

Javen pointed down to the base of the lighthouse. "Your friends are here, aren't they?"

"Not those ones. My other ones, from when I left. I'm angry I couldn't go visit them in Tolbi, too."

"Oh," Javen said. "So you're lonely?"

Sheba chewed her lip thoughtfully. "Yeah, I guess that's a good word. I want to see them again."

Both sat in silence for a short while, before Javen said quietly, "You want to leave us again, don't you?"

Sheba looked over at him sharply, then pulled his head into her chest and kissed it. "Don't ever think that, Javen. I love you, and our parents, and I never want to leave you. But I love all my friends, too, and I want to be able to see them."

"But how can you be with them and with us?" he asked. "They don't live near here."

"Some of them do," she said. "But even if I leave, I will always come back. I promise."

Javen smiled. "I know."

Sheba raised an eyebrow. "You knew? Then why did you ask?"

"I was just testing you!" he said, giggling.

"Oh? Did I pass?"

"Yep!"

"Well, that's good," she said. "Otherwise, I might've had to do...this!" Pushing Javen onto his back, Sheba attacked his sides with her fingers, tickling him mercilessly. The boy squealed as he rolled around, trying in vain to bat away her hands. When she finally stopped, he fell limp against the aerie floor, gasping for air.

"No...fair..." he said between breaths.

"I don't need to be fair," she replied, poking him in the chest. "I'm your big sister. I do what I want."

Javen finally sat back up, his face flushed, and snuggled up next to Sheba. "I don't want you to leave again."

"It'll only be for a little while," she said. Looking out over the ocean, she pointed to the fog bank to the southeast. "Maybe you can come with me sometime. We could go out there, to Lemuria."

"What's that?" he asked.

"It's a city," she said. "An island. A bunch of people live there, and they never get old. One of my friends used to live

there."

Javen's mouth dropped open. "What? They never get old? Could we live there too?"

Smiling, Sheba said, "No, I don't think you'd like that. It's neat to visit, but staying there would get very boring. And there's almost no other kids for you to play with."

"Oh," he said, his face dropping. "What sort of people live there, then?"

"Old members of the Mercury Clan," she said. "Once, it used to be a great city that ruled the sea. After the big fight the clans had, though, the Mercury Clan mostly moved back there and made that fog to keep people out."

"What's their animal?" he asked suddenly.

"Um...what?"

"Their animal," he said again. "You said earlier Jupiter is birds and Venus is people, so what's Mercury?"

"Oh, that," she said, shaking her head. "You had me all confused. Mercury is represented by fish, since they control the sea. And Mars," she continued as Javen opened his mouth, "is represented by dragons."

His face lit up once more. "Wow, dragons? That's awesome! I wish I could see a dragon!"

Smiling slightly, Sheba shook her head again. "No, Javen, I don't think you do."

"Huh? Why not?"

As Sheba opened her mouth to respond, the back of her neck prickled suddenly. When her hand slid up to rub it, she noticed that the aerie had become much more yellow. Looking up to the sky, she saw that clouds had blotted out the sun and were rapidly spreading – much more rapidly than naturally possible.

"Javen, we need to go," she said quietly, trying not to scare him. Taking hold of his hand as she stood up, she walked him back to the edge of the aerie, then picked him up once more for the short trip to the elevator. As soon as they reached it, her hand snapped out and smashed the button, starting the mechanism.

She felt the wind rising as the elevator slowly began to move, whipping her hair around her face. The black shroud had spread across the entire sky around them now, the clouds still rolling across each other. She could feel the charge behind them growing, threatening to unleash itself on those caught nearby. Why did this elevator move so damn slow?

"Sheba, what's going on?" Javen asked with a whimper, clutching his sister's arm tightly.

"It's okay, Javen," she said, kneeling down and hugging him. "It's just a storm. We just need to get inside."

She did not need to read his mind to tell that he did not believe her; his trembling did that just as well. To be honest, she did not hold much confidence in her words, either, but she tried her hardest to believe them while telling them to Javen over and over on their trip down.

When the elevator finally stopped, Sheba pulled her brother off immediately as everything suddenly darkened, clouds

enveloping the beacon entirely. She quickly made a beeline for the lighthouse entrance. "Let's get the oth-

A loud crack cut her off as a brilliant flash lit up the sky. Looking up, she saw lightning strike the lighthouse over and over. Immediately she felt her skin tingle again, her hair drifting towards the lighthouse. She pulled Javen to the ground and shouted at him to stay there, then ran inside.

Though normally she could feel a faint Venusian presence in the structure, now she could feel nothing but Jupiter's wrath flowing through the stones, as impossible as it sounded. All around her the energy surged, threatening to unleash at any moment.

Too soon, the moment came, though fortunately, not all at once. Lightning arced from the ceiling to one of the statues, causing the frightened children to scream. "Get out!" Sheba shouted, stepping aside from the doorway. "Get out and stay down!"

Stepping past the sudden rush of children and scholars, Sheba began gathering the latent energy from the lighthouse, pulling it towards her. It had the desired effect – the next bolt that dropped from the ceiling struck her outstretched hand. She directed the foreign energy through her own body, discharging it through her feet to the ground.

As she felt more and more lightning pound the lighthouse from above, though, she knew the growing charge would soon be too much for her. Glancing around quickly as she discharged another bolt and finding the chamber empty, she turned and ran back outside, finding everyone flattened on the wooden platform.

"Let's go!" she shouted at the mass of prone bodies. "To Suhalla Sanctum!"

Picking out Javen as everyone rose and making sure he was safe, Sheba began herding the group forward, away from the lighthouse. Suddenly, the air seemed to turn still as everyone's hair stood up. "Down!" Sheba shouted, holding her hand up again. With a flash that seared her eyes and a crack that rocked her head, the bolt of lightning coursed through her body. Unlike the smaller bolts inside the lighthouse, this one still shocked her entire right side as it traveled, leaving her gasping at the painfully numb sensation.

Her eyes burned; she could only see blurred shapes moving around her. One stopped and looked at her, mouthing something she could not hear, but she simply waved her hand forward. "I'm fine, keep going!"

Sight and sound slowly returned as they ran across the wooden walkways. Sheba could feel lightning dropping around them, though focused on the lighthouse, but all struck the ground above their heads. Briefly she considered holing everyone up on the walkways, but quickly discarded the idea. If the lightning overcame Venus Lighthouse's protection and destroyed part of the cliff, it would take the walkways with it. They needed to be on solid ground, with something over their heads. She hoped that all of the scholars who normally studied the lighthouse had escaped with them; an unpleasant end met any who were still in the lighthouse.

The walkway turned into stairs, climbing back up the cliff as it reached the river. Sheba followed everyone across the bridge, looking out over the ocean; no rainbow awaited her today. Once across the bridge, the cliffs of Suhalla Gate came into sight. Before they could run any further, though, another bolt flashed out and smashed into the cliff top,

shattering the rock face. Boulders rained down onto the path below as everyone skidded to a halt.

"Sheba!" Miss Tamara shouted. "We can't go that way! We'll be crushed!"

The girl glanced around, chewing her lip. They could dig a trench on the lake beach, but it would take too long to make one the size they needed. The forest was dangerous, and she could smell the burning trees already, at any rate. The lighthouse was out of the question. The plains offered no protection besides her. The cliffs, both to Suhalla and to Lalivero, were too dangerous.

A slightly less dangerous answer came to her, and had she not known the terrible danger of the constant fluctuations in potential above her head, she never would have considered it. "Back to the bridge!" she shouted. "Get onto the banks of the river!"

Leading them backwards, she pointed down to the sloped banks, solid land that would let them lie below ground level and protect them from the lightning. "Don't touch the water," she said, motioning at the rapids. "It'll sweep you away. Hold on to someone else just in case."

Standing atop the banks as the others began to crawl down them, she glanced around them once more. Javen had linked hands with one of the scholars as they carefully slid down the slope. Before she could crouch down with the last of the people, though, she felt the charge in the air grow sharply. Raising a hand to intercept the bolt, the area around her suddenly became awash with yellow light as the clouds withdrew from Venus' beacon.

She was struck with a slightly nauseous feeling, her skin tingled briefly, and then everything suddenly went black.

Isaac watched Ivan patiently, the younger boy staring intently at what remained of a house after the roof collapsed – or more likely, exploded inward. The great bolts of lightning had decimated everything they touched, but a few lucky survivors had managed to avoid direct strikes, instead simply being pinned underneath the resulting debris.

Ivan blinked and looked at Isaac, shaking his head. Not this one, then.

"Let's go, Isaac," he heard Jenna say from behind him. "There might be someone in the next one."

"Yeah," he said softly. "Sure." Helping Ivan across a crater in the road, he moved back to Jenna's side and began walking again. A train of stragglers followed behind them, some pulled from destroyed buildings, some having been found alone in the streets.

"Where are we headed?" one woman asked.

"Probably nowhere," another muttered. "We'll probably just wind up getting robbed, if any of us actually have anything worth stealing."

"You'll be fine," Isaac said, looking back. "We're headed to an inn on the west side of town. There's others gathered there already."

Ivan looked back as well, then said quietly, "There's going to be trouble soon."

Jenna glanced over at him nervously. "A vision?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "Just an educated guess. They're getting tense. Put some stressed strangers together and, well..."

Isaac watched the younger boy shake his head, then look up to the sky. He followed Ivan's gaze to the moon, rising in the afternoon sky. "See any change yet?"

"No," Ivan said. "Still normal. So far."

"You said the moon fell during the lightning storm in your dream though, right?" Jenna asked.

He looked at her bleakly. "Who said that would be the only one?"

Frowning, Jenna said, "But you said that the lightning started, and then the moon fell right after."

"Dreams don't need to make sense," he said. "A lot of times, what I see in my dreams just symbolizes what will happen. Usually, lightning represents danger, or sometimes power. I dreamt of a lightning storm on Mars Lighthouse the night before we climbed it."

"So you weren't expecting an actual lightning storm today," Isaac said thoughtfully. "What about Alex? Did you dream anything about him?"

Shaking his head, Ivan said, "Not specifically, no. I've had a sense of unease for almost a week now, and when he suddenly appeared, I thought he was the cause, but-"

A shout from behind cut him off. Isaac turned around to find a slender woman pointing a dagger at a much larger man, who had drawn his sword. Isaac instantly ran towards them. "Hey! What do you think you're doing?" As they both looked

at him, he grabbed the man's arm and pulled him away from the woman.

"Hey, wha-"

"Isaac!" A sharp gust of wind rushed past him, sending the woman stumbling to the side. Ivan stepped next to Isaac, pointing a finger at the woman.

"Ivan, what are you doing?" he asked, not releasing the man.

Keeping his eyes trained on the woman with the dagger, Ivan said, "He's not the aggressor, she is. He drew his sword to defend himself. When you pulled him aside, she lunged."

Isaac also looked at the woman, who had grudgingly resheathed her dagger, staring back at Ivan with a hateful expression. "Of course, you would defend him," she said.

"What are you talking about?" Isaac asked. "Why would you even attack him?"

"Why?" she spat. "It was his kind that caused all this!"

Isaac just stared at her blankly. "Uh...I'm fairly certain he was not the one who did this to Tolbi."

"I never said it was, you idiot," she said, turning her gaze on Isaac. "I said it was his kind, the lightning Adepts. Your kind," she added, looking back at Ivan.

"Wait a second," Jenna said, stepping next to Ivan. "Are you seriously trying to kill him because it was Jupiter Psynergy that caused all this? A man who probably can't make more than static?"

The woman's eyes focused on Jenna, and this time, Isaac could see the uninhibited rage on her face and feel the unconscious Psynergy rolling off her in waves. Had she been an experienced Adept, he would have been very cautious. "My son is dead," she whispered furiously. "I watched as one of those terrible bolts struck him. There was nothing left but a scorch mark. Don't even *begin* to try and mock my pain."

Jenna's mouth opened for a moment, then shut again. "I'm...sorry. I didn't know."

"But what good will killing him do?" Isaac asked. "It's terrible that you lost someone, but killing him won't bring your son back."

"No," the woman said, straightening herself up. "It won't. But maybe it will prevent someone else from suffering the same tragedy in the future." As she turned around, a path cleared in front of her. "I'll find my own way. I refuse to be led to refuge by that freak. You should kill him before he does this somewhere else."

Ivan looked at the ground as Isaac shouted, "Hey! This isn't his fault!"

The woman ignored him, but when Isaac stepped forward to follow, Ivan grabbed his arm. "Isaac...please. Let her go. It doesn't bother me."

Frowning, Isaac looked back at him. "Yes it does. You're already feeling guilty. Stop it."

He shook his head, smiling up at him. "I'm fine, Isaac. Really. Come on, there's another house up here."

Isaac watched him move ahead, heading for a crater of a house. "It's because she called him a freak," Jenna said,

looking at the boy also. "It's a sensitive word to him."

"It is?"

She nodded. "He didn't grow up in a community of Adepts, like we did. People found his powers strange. You've never wondered why he's so quiet and reserved?"

Isaac shrugged. "I never thought about it too much. Everyone's different, and he's never like that around us."

"That's because he's comfortable around us," she said.

"Then why did he never tell me about this?" Isaac asked, confused. "We've always been close. Or at least, I thought we were."

Jenna shook her head. "You are. It's just a different kind of close. He cares a lot more about what you think of him, that's all."

Isaac thought about that for a few moments as they started walking again, following Ivan. A different kind of close... It made sense. Garet had a different relationship with his brother than his father, but still loved them both equally. His mother's love for him was different from her love for his father, yet no less potent. How exactly did Ivan see him, then?

"Hey! Over here!"

Ivan's voice cut through his thoughts as the boy began waving frantically. Isaac ran forward, sliding to a stop beside his friend. "Did you find someone?"

The Jupiter Adept nodded, pointing at the rubble. "There's a little kid trapped in there, over on the left side." He

hesitated for a moment. "Isaac...the building collapsed onto itself, so it's partially holding itself up. If you move something wrong..."

Isaac nodded. "Here, show me exactly where he is." Reaching out, he grabbed hold of Ivan's hand as both turned toward the rubble. Colors ran together, bleeding across the world before fading out, leaving the image of a small child in the building. He was not moving, simply lying on the ground, his arm at an odd angle underneath him. Isaac took the opportunity to glance at the structure itself, quickly seeing what Ivan had meant – the walls had fallen onto each other, making a small triangle around the child. To move one would drop the other. Tricky.

Releasing Ivan's hand, Isaac breathed a sigh of relief as the normal returned. Jupiter's revealing eye had always set him on edge, so he looked through it as infrequently as possible. Stepping forward, he placed his hands gingerly against the stone, using his own powers to see the building in a much more comfortable manner. He could feel the pressure now, the friction, the stresses, the gravity. It made so much more sense to him this way, instead of simply seeing the entire building at once with his eyes. This way, he saw it with his entire *body,* and he instantly knew what to do.

Closing his eyes, he reached out with Psynergy, not to sense, but to act. Holding out a single hand, Isaac sharply pulled down, as if jerking an invisible cord. Immediately the house collapsed, causing a cry of surprise from Ivan. Isaac ignored him though, concentrating. Slipping up here would kill the child in a much worse manner than simply being crushed.

Slowly, the ground at Isaac's feet began to pulse and crack, pushing outward until it finally broke. Inside the newly created hole lay the child, a boy slightly younger than

Aaron. Jenna and Ivan approached as Isaac crouched down, gently pulling the boy into his arms.

"His arm is broken," Jenna said, eying it. "Ivan, find me a couple straight pieces of wood."

The boy obediently began searching as the two continued examining the child. "Hey, wait," Isaac said suddenly. "I met this kid on the way to the colosseum this morning. He recognized me."

"That's good," Jenna muttered distractedly, her fingers poking in a few areas. "Well, other than the broken arm and some minor things, he looks fine. Let's splint that before we go."

They waited another minute until Ivan returned with the wood. "Sorry," he said. "Are these good? I wanted to make sure the wood was solid enough."

Jenna took the pieces in hand and tried bending them, yielding only a slight curve. "These are fine, thanks." She slid her cape off and began tearing it into strips without hesitation, handing the sticks back to Ivan while she worked. Once satisfied, she had Ivan hold the sticks in place while she tied them to the boy's arm carefully.

Upon finishing, she lifted the injured arm up slightly to inspect her handiwork. "It'll do," she said finally. "We need to get him to a healer, though, so they can set the bone."

"Then let's keep heading to the inn," Isaac said, carefully shifting the boy into a more comfortable position for carrying. "There'll probably be one there."

"Brooke, we really need to be moving."

Felix did not respond to his companion, barely even hearing him. His senses were tuned towards the earth, reaching out with long, snaking fingers into the city of Tolbi. Everywhere around him, feet pounded the ground, some in furious haste, some in soft caution, some with apathetic regularity. Try as he might, though, he could not pick out Jenna's.

He sighed, opening his eyes again. This sort of Psynergy was more of Isaac's field, not Felix's. Give him a mountain and he'd move it, but he had no chance of picking out a single set of vibrations in a city full of panic.

The lightning had stopped, but the black clouds still rolled ominously overhead, blanketing the city in shadow. He could feel no more Psynergy in the air, but most of the city did not have his proficiency; the continued presence of the clouds meant future storms could occur at any moment. Though they had lessened significantly, shouts and cries still rang out across the unnaturally dark afternoon. Though he had not seen any yet, the smell of smoke drifted along the wind, visiting his nostrils from time to time.

"Brooke?"

"Quiet. Let him listen."

Felix looked back, the gladiator who had pulled him out of the arena waiting patiently. Garet stood to his side, shifting nervously, but his expression turned hopeful as Felix turned around. "Sorry, I can't read anything specific," the man said, shaking his head. "Most people seem to be headed to the west side of the city, though."

Temblin nodded. "Then we should follow."

Garet responded by stepping onto one of Tolbi's many roads, the gladiator and Felix following. From the general image the Venus Adept had seen, they had ran east after escaping the colosseum. He had seen Isaac grab hold of Jenna, dragging both her and Ivan from the arena, but a surge in the crowd separated him from them. He had picked a direction to go, not thinking until later to try and find them with Psynergy.

Felix sighed again. Isaac had meant well, he always did, but sometimes the boy rushed things too much. He doubted Jenna was in danger; Alex seemed to be hunting Isaac in particular, but had no intention of harming the others. He had neutralized Felix, Ivan, and Jenna with little effort, but in relatively painless ways.

Though...how had he done that? Felix knew the power of Venus well, recognizing gravity seize hold of him and wrench him down; he had used similar Psynergy before. But from Alex? How was that even possible? Was this the supposed power of the Golden Sun?

It still made no sense, though. Why would he be after Isaac? No one had even seen him since the Sun's dawn, not even the Valeans who had watched him stride past their warnings towards Mount Aleph. Personally, Felix had believed the self-centered pretty boy had been wiped from existence by the pure force of Alchemy, but evidently, he had been wrong.

A pity, Felix thought. He would have been more than happy to spend the rest of his life never again being involved in his...machinations.He shook his head once more. These thoughts were just leading him in circles, only serving to fuel his own frustration at the situation. Better to leave them until he had better company to discuss them with.

His eyes found Garet, plodding ahead at a steady pace. He had been silent since leaving the arena, a situation so unusual it unnerved Felix a bit. Garet never thought things through well, and strong emotions only made him blunder more blindly. Isaac had never blamed Garet for it, but Felix knew just how close he had come to killing all of them on Jupiter Lighthouse with his rash decisions.

Something stupid was coming, he knew. It was only a matter of time. With any luck, he could head it off before Garet could hurt himself or someone else.

A sudden laugh from a nearby house broke him out of his thoughts. Attention was needed, to be sure, but not exclusively. Dangerous mistakes were made like that, and enough danger had been endured for one day.

"Brooke, wait," he heard Temblin call from behind him. Felix turned around to find the gladiator looking at the house they had just walked by. "I heard voices inside."

Felix looked at the house, then back at Temblin. "So?"

"They were loud and raucous," he explained softly. "What sort of people would be finding pleasure on a day such as this?"

Glancing back at the house, Felix's eyes narrowed slightly, irritated at Temblin's testing attitude. It vanished as another laugh carried out from one of the shattered windows, though. "Burglars," he said shortly, now irritated with himself that he had not made the connection himself. A dangerous mistake.

Temblin nodded and began walking towards the house, but Felix's voice stopped him. "Wait. We have more pressing issues."

"I will not stand by and let these criminals take advantage of such a terrible tragedy like this," the gladiator said, locking his gaze with Felix's.

"Felix is right, Buford," Garet said, stopping and turning. "My brother is still out there. As much as I can't stand the thought of it either, I'm not stopping looking for him to deal with a bunch of lowlifes."

"And it's not a good idea to split up, either," Felix continued. "Believe me, I would like nothing more than to go and deliver some justice, but let's be honest – they aren't the ones responsible for this."

Temblin's eyes widened very slightly in response and Felix knew he had guessed right, so he pressed his opening. "Justice isn't what we need right now, safety is. Safety for us, and security for others."

The two Venus Adepts stared at each other for a long moment. Eventually, though, Temblin nodded. "I suppose you're right. I just...this whole thing makes me frustrated and want to fight something, but that blue-haired twit isn't around."

Garet snorted, moving forward again. "I like you, Buford, and your priorities."

Felix said nothing as he fell behind Garet, silently agreeing. A fist in Alex's face would improve his mood considerably, but that sentiment was no stranger to him.

"I take it you know that man, then," Temblin said.

"As well as anyone knows him, I suspect," Felix said. "That doesn't mean much, though."

"We already owe him good," Garet added. "This is just another favor to repay."

As loath as he was to admit it, Felix agreed with Garet again. The attack on Isaac had been one thing, but to unleash such hell on innocent people? It made no sense. He had deliberately avoided harming them, some of the most dangerous people around. What game was he playing, here?

He took a deep breath and stepped back from the picture. What were Alex's ultimate goals? Unknown, but they knew he wanted something that Isaac had. Did it matter? No, he decided. Not right now. Isaac would have the best idea. When they found him, they could talk it out and find the answer.

So motive remained a question mark. What about methods? He had attacked in broad daylight, in the middle of a tournament full of powerful warriors. Most would say it marked an overconfident fool, a category into which Alex certainly fell, but it also could have been an attempt to attack while Isaac was fatigued.

Surprise was obviously Alex's primary tactic, though. He'd disabled each of them in unexpected ways by utilizing Psynergy none of them had expected. When they met again, as Felix suspected would inevitably happen, the fight would be considerably less one-sided. Between each of them, they could easily counter his versatility.

And then it clicked. "He separated us," Felix said aloud.

Garet glanced over his shoulder. "What?"

"Alex," Felix said. "This storm was designed to separate Isaac from the rest of us, at least partially. Whatever he wants

from Isaac, he'd rather have him alone when he takes it. He counted on the chaos in the storm's aftermath to divide us."

Nodding, Garet said, "A risky gamble. Just the sort of thing that son of a-" He paused, flexing his hands and taking a deep breath. "-that he would do."

There had to be more to it, though, Felix thought. Why had Alex suddenly expressed such blatant disregard for the people around them? Something was missing, he realized. Something they did not yet know about Alex, perhaps. Or maybe it dealt with his unknown objective.

"Aaron!"

A sudden movement brought Felix's attention to Garet, who had suddenly broken into a sprint. Felix immediately dashed forward, following him as closely as he could, but Garet's initial burst had given him a solid head start. "Garet! Garet!"

The redhead ignored him, tearing down the street with a speed that belied his large frame, bounding along the rubble strewn about the road. Even clearing himself a path with his Psynergy, Felix found himself falling behind slightly.

Suddenly, Felix understood Garet's sudden burst of energy: ahead, in the distance, he caught a glimpse of a small head of red hair, hovering over a line of thick bushes. He could not tell if it was actually Garet's brother, not at this distance. Apparently Garet thought he could, though. He was hell-bent on running straight through to...

To...

"Garet, stop!" Felix shouted, but the warning came too late. Felix watched as Garet plunged through the bushes and

vanish, the ground suddenly ending as it dropped into a canyon-like path through the center of the city.

Skidding to a halt, Felix thrust his mind into the ground, then forced it forward with a push of his hands. He felt his Psynergy smash through the cliff face, dragging with it a platform of rock. For one long second, Felix felt his heart leap into his throat as he felt nothing; he had missed. But then he felt Garet land on the outcropping, causing Felix to let out the breath he never realized he had held.

He started forward again at a light jog, reaching out with his mind to find the edge of the cliff. As he neared it, he realized how Garet had fallen – the bushes he had seen ringed the cliff's crest, disguising the drop.

Carefully picking his way through them, Felix glanced over the edge and found Garet lying on the stone ledge, looking up at him. The fall had not seemed to hinder his fervor, though. "Felix, hurry, send me up the other side."

The Venus Adept just stared at him for a few moments, then curled his hand. The ledge broke down into rocks, then pebbles, and finally sand as it flowed up the cliff, rolling over itself and carrying Garet back to the top.

When he arrived, Garet stepped off, brushing the sand away as he said, "Felix, I appreciate the help, but I need to get to the other side."

"No, you don't, Garet," Felix snapped. "You just ran yourself straight off the edge of a cliff. If I hadn't been here, you would have probably broken both your legs...at best."

Garet's mouth dropped open before he gestured behind him, glanced back also, then turned back to Felix. "I saw Aaron! He was over there! I need to get to him!"

"You only think you saw him," Felix said, his voice rising. "I saw the same thing – a distant flash of red hair. A lot of people have red hair."

"But I need to get over there!"

Felix shook his head, taking a deep breath to calm himself. "We're heading back to the palace. That's where the others will head to meet back up with us, too."

"You don't know that, Felix!" Garet shouted. "Just because that's what you would do doesn't mean everyone else will!"

"Fine," Felix snapped, "maybe they won't, but Kraden certainly will, and he and Iodem are the ones with your brother."

The comment earned a snort from Garet. "Oh, that's great. I certainly hope two old men can protect him."

"Kraden is more than capable of keeping them all out of danger," Felix said, turning around and motioning to the silently observing Temblin. "Let's get going."

"No."

The man stopped again. After a second, he turned around. "Garet, how likely do you really think it is that you'll just *happen* to run into your brother out here?"

Glaring at Felix, Garet said through clenched teeth, "It's better than doing nothing."

Felix threw his hands up. "Damn it, Garet, we're not doing nothing! We're going to the most likely place that your brother will head to! You have a far better chance of finding him by coming back!"

"I can't just leave him out there!" Garet said, sweeping his hand around him. "You saw the kind of people that disasters bring out!"

"And I suppose you think I'm perfectly fine with Jenna being out there?" Felix asked. "I don't like that any more than you like your brother being out there."

"But Jenna can defend herself," Garet said. "Aaron is just a little kid!"

"A little kid who slings some nasty fireballs," Felix said dryly, rubbing his shoulder in painful memory. "Need I remind you how much you've been teaching him?" Garet opened his mouth to respond, but Felix raised his hands. "Look, Garet, I'm trying to help you. You nearly got yourself killed, and for nothing. Come with me. Aaron will show up at the palace, if he isn't already there."

Garet looked at Felix doubtfully, then looked around him again, surveying the city. Eventually he returned his gaze to Felix. "Are you sure?"

Felix nodded. "I swear it."

Crossing his arms, Garet nodded. "I... I'm trusting you, Felix. Let's go."

As they turned and continued toward the west, Felix silently hoped that Kraden was not as aged as he made himself out to be.

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"I like that one," Jenna said with a smile. "Where'd you learn it?"

"From this pirate," Tobias said. "He stopped by the inn and taught it to me. Mom told me I couldn't sing it, though."

Jenna laughed. "Moms are like that sometimes. We'll just keep it our little secret, though."

Tobias nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, she'd probably get real mad at me."

Ruffling his hair, Jenna asked, "How's your arm feeling?"

The boy looked down at his splinted arm, then back up at Jenna. "It's fine. It hurts a little, but Isaac made it feel a lot better."

"That's good," she said. "When we get to the inn, we'll have someone fix it completely, but make sure you thank Isaac before."

Nodding enthusiastically, he said, "I will." He remained silent for a moment, then added, "I wish I could have seen him at Colosso. I told him I'd be watching, too."

"Did you miss it?" Jenna asked.

Tobias sighed, nodding his head. "You have to be ten to watch from one of the stand-up areas. They said it was so that kids didn't get stepped on."

"Aw, that's too bad," Jenna said, giving him a quick hug. "If it makes you feel any better, there wasn't a whole lot to see. It all ended pretty fast."

"Too bad for mom, then," he said.

Jenna looked at him strangely. "Wait, your mom stayed to watch? Who brought you home?"

"No one. I'm not a little kid!"

"You walked home alone?" Jenna asked with a raised eyebrow. This kid could not have been older than seven. Was his mother really that irresponsible?

He nodded, not noticing her questioning expression. "I went back home, really sad I couldn't see Isaac, and then the storm came." A smile brightened his face. "But then I got to meet Isaac anyway."

"Yeah, things have a weird way of working out sometimes," she said, making a mental note to have words with Tobias' mother if she ran into her.

Irresponsible parents were one of Jenna's biggest pet peeves. Too many times she had seen children almost hurt or even killed due to a parent's negligence or poor decision. Being Jenna, she never let such a moment by without taking some time to chew on the parent's ear for a while. Some were apologetic, while some were indignant, and some simply started shouting back. She liked the last ones the best; she rarely lost shouting contests.

It was also one of the few times that Felix made no effort to stop or chastise her for losing her temper, either. He would never say anything at all about it, actually, and though he tended to be more lenient with her, Jenna knew that to be his approval. After all, he certainly never missed a chance to tell Garet off about anything, even the most minor incidents.

She giggled, remembering the time Felix had started shouting at Garet for climbing on their neighbor's roof, only for Garet to calmly explain that he had been helping their son down, who had climbed up and gotten himself stuck. Garet walked away with the purest expression of

satisfaction, while Felix had refused to speak to anyone for the rest of the day; Garet earned himself three.

"Something funny?"

Looking up from the road, she saw Isaac returning from up ahead. "Just thinking about my brother and Garet."

Isaac rolled his eyes. "No further explanation necessary. How's your arm, Tobias?"

The boy grinned widely. "It's great! Thanks Isaac!"

Tobias' cheerfulness prompted a similar return from Isaac. "That's good. Listen, the inn is right up here, so we'll be there in just a minute. I'm going to go let everyone else know, too."

Jenna nodded, then looked past Isaac, finding a three-story building waiting for them. Hundreds of people surrounded it, many of them seemingly looking for loved ones. Jenna suddenly understood why so many had chosen to head west – none of the buildings seemed to have been damaged. She stood on her tiptoes to look around, for all the good it did, but could see no lightning strikes.

"Hey, that's my aunt's house!"

Jenna looked down at Tobias in surprise, then back at the inn. "Really? Your aunt runs that inn?"

He nodded. "We come visit her a lot."

Taking his hand, she said, "Well, come on then, let's go find her. I'm sure she'll be happy to see you."

Following the crowd down to the inn, several people began breaking off to search the throngs outside. On the other side of the inn, Jenna could see a long line, heading at a table with several large pots in front of it. Many more passed the doors in favor of some food. Instead of joining them, Jenna stepped through the open doors to the inn, finding it much less crowded than she expected. Most people stayed outside to find others easier, she guessed.

She looked around as she made her way to the main counter, noting that most of the people inside sat alone at tables, staring at their glasses of water somberly. She tried not to think about what had brought them here. Behind the counter was an older woman, busy speaking to a younger one, about Jenna's age. She waited patiently for her turn as the woman tending the bar pointed to various places on a map, apparently giving directions.

The inn itself was certainly nice, Jenna noted. The hardwood floors looked like they had been polished recently, probably for Colosso. Beautiful red and yellow drapes adorned the windows, held back with gold cord. Three full stories...they never had any buildings this big back in Vale, and certainly not in Vault, although the city could probably use with more vertical buildings.

"Can I help you with something?"

Jenna looked at the woman again, finding the younger one stepping away. As she opened her mouth to respond, though, she heard Tobias shout excitedly, "Aunt Lina!"

The woman's hands flew to her mouth as she practically dove around the counter. "Tobias!" She stopped just short of pulling him into a tight embrace, pausing for a moment, then hugging him, carefully avoiding his broken arm.

Jenna assumed the woman must be his aunt, which was only reinforced when she stood up straight again and turned to her. "Did you bring him here?" she asked breathlessly, tears in her eyes.

Nodding, Jenna said, "We found him in a collapsed house near the center of town. We were able to get him out and patch him up a little bit, but he needs to get to a healer."

Lina rubbed at her eyes and nose. "Thank you, so very, very much." She turned back to Tobias. "Here, head back into the kitchen for a minute. Aunty will be there in a minute."

The boy nodded and did as he was told, allowing Lina to return her attention to Jenna. "I... I have no way to thank you enough for this."

Shaking her head, Jenna smiled. "We don't need any. Just keep doing what you're doing and helping everyone."

Lina looked back into the kitchen, then dropped her eyes to the floor. "His mother...my sister... She was at Colosso during the storm. She... She didn't..." The woman's hand moved to her trembling mouth as she fell silent.

Jenna could say nothing at first, struck speechless. "Are you sure?" she said after a minute, once Lina had recovered. "How can you know?"

"A friend," she said simply. "He was there, and he saw it. He said there was nothing left. When he stopped by her inn, to check on Tobias, he found it collapsed. When he told me, I thought... I thought they had both..."

The woman stopped as Jenna wrapped her arms around Lina, pulling the woman into a tight embrace. Lina stood still for a moment, then returned the hug, sobbing softly into Jenna's

shoulder. The Mars Adept gently stroked her hair, whispering words of encouragement into her ear, though her own mind had gone numb. She remembered, in a rather detached manner, when her own aunt had held her in the same way, the night of Vale's terrible storm.

When she finally pulled back, Lina wiped at her eyes once more and smiled. "I'm sorry. You've done me such a great kindness and I don't even know your name."

"I'm...Jenna. Jenna Brooke," she said slowly.

She nodded, then looked around her, holding out her hands. "If there's anything you need, please let me know. We're forever in your debt for this."

Jenna nodded in return and thanked her, then turned around. The gravity of the woman's words were finally reaching her – Tobias had no idea his mother had been killed, or that he likely would have been killed too, had he been there. She felt tears rise to her own eyes as she saw the boy smile in her mind's eye once more, wondering when he would find out.

"Jenna? Are you okay?"

The girl looked to the side and found Ivan walking towards her, a concerned look on his face. She quickly wiped at her eyes and sniffed loudly, giving away what she had hoped to cover up a bit better. "I'll be alright," she said. "Just... Something just hit a little close to home, that's all." Sniffing again, she asked, "What about you? I haven't seen much of you since...since we pulled Tobias out. How are you doing?"

He shrugged in response. "I'm fine. I've just been doing some thinking."

Jenna looked at him closely, trying to read past that infuriating mask of indifference he wore so often. "Are you sure? You seemed a bit shaken up earlier."

Ivan looked away from Jenna, into the crowd of people. "It's not the first time I've been called names, Jenna. It stopped bothering me a long time ago."

"Don't lie to me, Ivan. I don't deserve that," she said, though she regretted the harshness of her words immediately. He didn't deserve that, either.

He did not respond for a long moment, simply staring off. Jenna knew it meant he was preparing a half-truth, but she had learned to take what she could from the boy. Eventually he said, "It bothers me sometimes just how ruthless people can be. It makes me wonder just why we're saving them." He sighed, then looked back at Jenna. "And then I see things like this, and I remember."

Smiling, Jenna pulled him in and hugged him close also. "Don't give up on people yet, Ivan. We can do some evil things, yeah, but we can do great things, too."

"I know," he mumbled quietly. "Sometimes I just forget that for a bit, though. I'm fine now, though." He pulled back and looked Jenna in the eyes. "Really, I am. There's more important things to be focused on right now."

She nodded. "You're right. Let's go find Isaac, then."

Ivan nodded his agreement and pointed to the side of the inn. "I saw him over there, talking to a few people."

Grabbing Ivan's hand to not lose him in the crowd, Jenna began squeezing through the thick crowd, glad that she had

something to focus on now. It helped distract her mind from Tobias, who her thoughts kept trying to wander back to.

As they emerged from the dense portion of the crowd, Ivan moved ahead, taking the lead. "He was over here somewhere."

Jenna followed closely behind him, glancing around them as they walked, but it was Ivan who spotted him first. He was talking very animatedly with three older men, all of whom seemed to be listening very attentively. When he spotted the two approaching, he quickly excused himself to come to them.

"We're planning some scouting parties to go back into the city to find more missing or injured people," he said. "I'd like to get one sent out as quickly as possible, maybe go with it, too."

Jenna nodded her head in agreement, but to her surprise, Ivan shook his. "We can't, Isaac."

The Venus Adept looked at him, confused. "What do you mean? A lot of people out there need help, Ivan. Help we can provide."

"I know that," the boy said. "Believe me, I want to help them too, but we have more important issues to deal with."

"Are you talking about Alex? Because we don't-

Ivan cut him off. "I'm talking about the *storm*, Isaac."

"Well, that's what we're trying to help deal with right now," Jenna said.

Shaking his head, Ivan said, "No, we're dealing with the effects. What we need to deal with is the cause. That was no natural storm."

"Right," Isaac said slowly, "but we don't know where Alex could have gone. We can't follow him."

"We don't need to," the boy said. "Alex didn't cause the storm."

Isaac did not respond for a moment, so Jenna took the opportunity. "What do you mean? If he didn't, who did?"

"I don't know," Ivan admitted. "That's what we need to find out. Whoever did it is a very powerful Adept, and I think we're the only ones who can oppose that sort of skill."

"But what makes you think it wasn't Alex?" Isaac said. "The storm came right after he showed up. That'd be one incredible coincidence, don't you think?"

Ivan nodded. "It is. But think about it this way: why would Alex release his hold on us to make that storm? He had you, Isaac, and had disabled everyone else. Why bother making a storm that would use up so much energy, it would allow us to escape?"

Thinking back to the morning, Jenna nodded slowly. "Come to think of it, he did look pissed after the first bolt landed. Was...was he trying to stop the storm?"

"I think so," Ivan said. "I felt the enormous Jupiter presence suddenly appear, and then I felt it wavering at the same time his Psynergy holding me vanished.

"So Alex abandoned his plan to kill me in order to try and save Tolbi?" Isaac asked. "I don't buy it."

"Who said he was trying to kill you?" Ivan shook his head. "He seemed very intent on not harming any of us, past what it took to stop us. Why do that only to bombard the city with lightning?"

Isaac nodded slowly. "No, you're right, that doesn't make much sense..."

"And then there were my dreams," Ivan continued. "I dreamed of the lightning, accompanied by the moon crashing into Weyard, but nothing that could relate to Alex. I've been over all manner of symbolism from it, but nothing fits him. To me, that means whatever threat he poses is overshadowed entirely by the source of this storm."

"So you want to start trying to find this source, then," Isaac said. After a nod from the boy, he asked, "What about all the people here, though? They still need our help. We can't just abandon them."

"Others can help here," Ivan said. "We might be the only ones who can stop this from happening again."

"He's right," Jenna said quietly, looking at Isaac. "As much as I want to help Tolbi recover, I want to stop this from happening again."

Isaac placed his hands on his hips and looked around them. As he did, Jenna's eyes drifted up to the inn again. Through one of the windows, she could see a sobbing Tobias with his arms wrapped around his aunt. Jenna bit down on the inside of her cheek as Isaac made up his mind.

"You're right," he said at last. "Where should we begin, though?"

"By finding the others," Ivan said. "The only place we've all been together in Tolbi is Bab- I mean, Kraden's Palace, so I'm sure the others will head back there. We can meet them there and figure out what to do. Maybe Kraden has some ideas."

Isaac agreed, and while they were leaving, Jenna thought again of Tobias. Even though she couldn't have protected him from this loss, she thought, she would certainly protect him from any more. To lose one's family... If she could help it, no one would ever suffer such a fate.

Chapter 3: Concern

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 3 – Concern

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The only things Ivan could feel any more were the fierce pounding of his heart against his chest and the sharp pain from the stitch in his side. His run had lasted what felt like hours through the dark city, seeing nothing else moving in the night.

Every so often he would stop, resting with his hands on his knees as his breaths came in great, ragged heaves. Before long, though, the sound of shuffling feet would reach his ears, or the swish of clothing, or the song of a sharp blade. He continued to find the strength to run, though he did not know how long that energy would last.

The buildings faded away, trees rising up in their places. He plunged into the thick of the forest without a second thought, wanting nothing more than to put distance between himself and his hunter. On a twisting and turning course Ivan's feet brought him, the idea of finding his way back out never once crossing his mind.

He stopped again, placing a hand on a tree for stability. His side felt like an inferno and his feet gradually grew heavier. Could he keep this up forever? How long could he run?

A soft melody drifted into his ears. Frantically he spun around, searching for the source, but could see nothing through the darkness but trees. Turning on his heel, he fled

once more, dashing away from the song, but he felt his feet thicken. His balance failed; his legs stumbled; his body fell.

Tears now streaming down the sides of his face, he began to crawl away desperately. He could hear the leaves crunch behind him in a steady, unhurried pace, slowly growing louder as they neared. His entire body now fought every movement, sluggishly responding to his increasingly frantic mental commands.

Something suddenly pressed into the small of his back, crushing him against the ground. He screamed in frustration and terror, demanding that his body obey him. A high-pitched voice responded to his cries with laughter, demonic and remorseless.

The pressure suddenly lifted from his back, but before he could try to escape again, something smashed into his side and shoved, rolling him over onto his stomach. Two red stars twinkled at him above the shimmer of grinning teeth before everything vanished.

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"He's sleeping."

"Go to him, I'm sure he'll want to wake up."

Garet's eyes opened blearily at the sound of voices, but before he could clear the drowsiness from them, something heavy landed on his stomach. Both air and fatigue left him quickly, his Psynergy quickly coming to bear. Only the sight of red quelled the coming firestorm.

"Aaron!"

Reaching forward, Garet pulled his brother into a bone-crushing hug, eliciting several loud cracks and a squeal from the boy. Apologizing, he let the boy step back, looked him up and down, then pulled him into a much more gentle embrace.

"Ugh, Garet, why do you always have to wake everyone up by shouting?" Ivan said as he sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Guys, look!"

"I swear, Garet," Jenna started, covering her face with a blanket, "if this isn't worth it-"

"Oh, don't worry, Jenna. I think you'll be pleased."

The girl immediately threw the blanket aside and looked up, as did the others. "Kraden! You're safe!"

The old scholar smiled. "I am, as is Iodem. I'm glad to see that all of you made it back safely, as well."

"What took you so long to get here?" Garet asked, standing up with Aaron on his back, his arms hooked under the boy's legs.

Kraden turned on Garet with an indignant expression. "I'm sorry we aren't as young as you lot," he said. "Someday you'll find yourselves getting tired at reasonable times, too, and you'll understand just how much you've put this old man through."

Isaac grinned. "Kraden, you're usually the first one awake and the last one asleep."

"No more backtalk," he said, wagging his finger. "Garet's been rubbing off on you too much."

"Hey, I don't backtalk!" Garet said, causing everyone to stare at him. "...You all can go feed dirges."

Kraden shook his head, looking around them. "Why are you all sleeping in the parlor? Oh, never mind. Come, we'll get the cooks to get some food together. I'm sure you're all very hungry."

"Yeah, I'm starving," Garet heard his brother say as they all began following Kraden to the dining hall.

He started to respond, but changed his mind and remained silent as the boy struck up a conversation with Jenna instead. His eyes fell on Felix in front of him, who had already begun explaining to Kraden the theories he and Ivan had discussed the previous evening, when the other three had arrived. Garet was not particularly concerned with figuring out Alex; though he was sometimes loath to admit it, both Felix and Ivan were very intelligent and observant. Between the two of them and Kraden, he had no doubt they would figure out what he planned.

After all, Felix had been precise in his assumption that everyone would head back to the palace. Upon arrival, Garet had nearly run back out after discovering the palace mostly empty, until Felix stopped him long enough to remind him that three strong, fit warriors accustomed to traveling would cross Tolbi in much less time than two old men and a child. Convinced to wait at least a day, they had settled down, only for Isaac, Jenna, and Ivan to arrive just after dusk.

They briefly shared their experiences, and although they had not seen Kraden, Iodem, or Aaron either, the fact that they had come to the palace left Garet feeling relieved. The talk quickly turned to Alex and their plans of action, Felix

agreeing with Ivan's conclusion, saying that it had significantly less holes than his theory.

Felix might have been wrong about Alex, but he had definitely been right about the palace. So why couldn't Garet find it in himself to apologize, or at least thank him? His courage was unquestionable; he never let fear interfere with his actions or judgment, always instinctively pushing it aside when he needed to. Like the day before, when he had been trying to follow what he thought had been Aaron up the face of a cliff. Fear had not even been an issue.

...Or had it? He glanced up, causing Aaron to look down at him and grin. He smiled back then looked forward again, thinking. True, he never feared for his own safety, but could he really say he never let fear affect him? Was it not fear for Aaron's safety that had driven him on a near-blind rush through the city?

Looking back, he realized it had happened before, too, just not for Aaron. Fear for Ivan had led him to take a strike of Saturos' meant for the boy. Mercury's beacon had saved him there, allowing Mia to stop the bleeding of a wound that would have otherwise been fatal. And on Jupiter, his fear for Mia had him leaping off a many-storied tower, almost falling to his death. Felix's timely arrival had been his salvation there.

While the latter had proved rather unnecessary, taking Saturos' blade had undoubtedly saved Ivan's life. Back then, Ivan had the constitution of...well, a young girl, something that Garet had mercilessly teased him about. He had eventually toughened, much to Garet's satisfaction, but still fell prey to the occasional jab from the older boy.

So did he really want to rid himself of that fear, too? It was certainly dangerous to himself, but it had undoubtedly saved lives before. Of course, getting himself killed did little good in the long run...

Garet shook his head as he walked into the dining hall. How had he even managed to get thinking about the subject? Now was not the time to be thinking about things like that; portents of doom might loom in their future, but at the moment, they were all safe. This should be a time of celebration!

His feelings must have shown on his face, however, because when Kraden glanced back, he immediately said, "Garet, please, no displays this morning. I think we could all use a nice, calm breakfast."

Frowning as he placed Aaron down, Garet said, "I wasn't going to do anything rowdy. I just think we should be happy that we all made it through this."

Kraden eyed him over the top of his glasses. "Yes, well, not everyone was as lucky as us. Let's try and keep them in mind." He motioned towards the table with a sweep of his arm. "Please, sit, everyone. The food will be here in a few minutes."

He waited until everyone had seated themselves, then slowly descended into his own chair. "First, I would like to personally thank Sean," Kraden said, causing the blue-haired man to wave at the others. "Without him, I expect Iodem, Aaron, and I would not have made it back here nearly as quickly or easily. We may very well owe him our lives, and that is a debt that can never quite be repaid.

"Second, I would like to also thank another of our Colosso competitors here this morning, Buford." At Kraden's words

the man nodded shortly, not looking at anyone in particular. Garet suspected he was not entirely comfortable being around people like this; he looked a lot like Ivan whenever the boy became ill at ease.

"While I certainly do not doubt the abilities of Felix and Garet," Kraden continued, "I am certainly grateful for his help in them returning to the palace. The streets of Tolbi have become rather dangerous since yesterday."

He paused here, chewing on his lip thoughtfully. "I would also like to apologize for failing to stop our...disturbance."

"Don't worry yourself with that," Felix said immediately. "Tolbi's soldiers stood no chance against him."

Kraden nodded. "I suppose you're right. Still, even though I had no way of preventing it, I feel responsible for the end result, both of Alex and this storm. Tolbi will need help in the coming weeks to re-stabilize. Buford, Sean, this is where I would like to ask both of you for your assistance."

Buford looked surprised, but said nothing. Sean asked in his place, "What sort of assistance, Lord Kraden?"

"While Colosso will unfortunately be canceled for this year, the guard is now lacking, and the ones I have left will be spread thin helping restore the city. I'm going to need competent warriors to help maintain the peace right now."

Buford nodded. "Of course. I would be honored to serve, Lord Kraden."

"As would I," Sean added. "Though I would like to get to Ouranos first, to make sure he's alright."

"We definitely saw the need for it," Garet said. "I'd like to help out also, Kraden, at least until we have a better idea of what we're doing."

Kraden shook his head. "Actually, Garet, I have another task for you and the others. While returning to the palace, I heard reports of a intense lightning storm to the south, near Lalivero. Specifically, around Venus Lighthouse."

Felix looked up sharply. "What? Like the one we had here?"

"No, no, not that bad," Kraden assured him. "I received a letter from one of my students there this morning by carrier pigeon, and he said that, other than its sudden appearance and ferocity, it was normal. Not necessarily an attack, like here."

"Still, that's too much to take as a coincidence," Jenna said. "Is Sheba alright?"

Shrugging, Kraden said, "I don't know. He didn't say. However, I figured that would be something you would want to investigate."

Ivan tapped the fingers of his folded arms thoughtfully. "Kraden, have you heard of anything similar from the other lighthouses?"

"No, but that's exactly the direction I was heading," Kraden said, smiling at Ivan. "I would like you to also investigate that."

Frowning, Felix said, "This is going to take some time to get around to each of the lighthouses. We wouldn't be back until tomorrow evening, most likely."

"That's true...if you went as a single group."

Garet stared at Kraden for a moment, as did the others. Only Sean and Buford did not, though they had obviously noticed something odd about the old man's statement from the reactions of the others. "How would we split up? Did you find another tool to let us teleport?"

Kraden shook his head. "There's no need. Those alchemy tools are nothing more than shortcuts, a means to allow Adepts to use complicated Psynergy without spending time mastering it. Ivan, I believe you are certainly skilled enough to teleport without the aid of the lapis."

The Jupiter Adept's eyes widened. "M-me? No, Kraden, I'm sure I can't. It's hard enough with the lapis, there's no way I could do it without."

"You can," Kraden said firmly, staring at Ivan so intensely that the boy had to drop his gaze. "The Psynergy is complex, no doubt about that. I doubt you will ever find it easy to perform, but I am fully confident in your ability to use it."

Garet looked at Ivan, who had not picked his eyes up from the floor. Kraden was probably right, he realized. Ivan always underestimated his own abilities, but had a talent for quickly mastering different uses of his Psynergy. He would just need some reassurance when the time came. "So I guess some of us would go with Ivan, while the others use the lapis?" Garet asked, returning his gaze to Kraden.

"That's correct," he said. "One group should go to Lalivero, since we know for a fact that a storm happened there. The other is up to you."

"I vote Imil," Garet said. "We should check up on Mia, as well."

"We have friends in Contigo and Prox too, though," Isaac said. "We need to check them."

Felix shook his head. "No, I agree with Garet. Prox is used to dealing with storms of all kinds. They'll be fine. And Hama is in Contigo right now, right?" Ivan nodded. "She can see the future clearer than Ivan, who saw it coming, so I'd bet they're fine as well. Imil is the most questionable one."

Jenna nodded. "I agree. We can check out Prox and Contigo this afternoon, after we're over the teleportation sickness, then return in the evening."

"No," Ivan said, "we should return here first. It'll delay getting to the other cities, but it's no use finding something out if we can't tell anyone, should something happen."

"A good plan," Felix said. "Any objections? No? Alright, then who are we sending where?" Silence descended on the table as each of the Adepts looked awkwardly from one to the other.

Kraden cleared his throat. "While I know you're all concerned about both, I also know you still hold allegiances to your old groups, even if you won't admit it. Felix, Jenna, go to Sheba. Isaac, Ivan, and Garet, go to Mia. Check on them, find out what, if anything, happened, and report back here."

Garet shuffled guiltily in his seat. As usual, Kraden had hit the nail on the head. He was concerned for Sheba, absolutely; she was a good friend to him, and he enjoyed having her around. But his first instinct was to find Mia, and it shamed him, despite Kraden's words.

"Then we should get going as soon as possible," Isaac said, standing up.

"Absolutely," Kraden said. "Now sit back down. You're not going anywhere until you've eaten."

With obvious effort, Isaac sat himself back down, bringing a grin to Garet's face in spite of the situation. "You're like his other mother, Kraden."

"I swear, sometimes I'm an other mother to *all* of you," he said.

Breakfast came and went quickly, though it lasted long enough for Garet to think that Ivan did a better job. The moment the last plate was empty, the five scattered to grab their gear. As Garet was buckling his sword belt on, he heard soft footsteps behind him, recognizing them immediately. "What is it, Aaron?"

He turned around and found the boy wearing the heaviest clothes he had brought and Garet understood. "Aaron..."

The boy's eyes turned pleading. "Garet, please. I want to come with you. I want to see Imil. I want to stay with you."

Garet shook his head. "No way, buddy. I don't know what we're going to find up there, and I want you somewhere I know is safe."

"But I can take care of myself! You're been training me!"

"I said no, Aaron."

His face turned as red as his hair before he turned and stormed out of the room, earning a sigh from Garet. Aaron was his brother, to be sure. Finishing his dressing-out, he returned to the entrance hall and stepped outside to the others.

"What's wrong?" Isaac asked immediately.

Garet waved a hand. "Just Aaron. He wants to go, I told him no. He'll get over it." He looked around. "Felix and Jenna already gone?

Isaac frowned, but nodded, turning to Ivan. "Are you ready?"

The blond boy shook his head. "I still don't think I can do this."

Kraden and Isaac both opened their mouths to reply, but Garet's mouth was faster. "Pff. Are you serious, Ivan? You're the smartest of all of us, and probably the best Adept as well. Weren't you the one who figured out how to put out a fire by making wind blow *away* from it? Come on, quit doubting yourself and just do it."

Ivan stared at him for a moment, saying nothing.

"Oh, yeah, and if you can't do it, I'm gonna steal your clothes while you're in the bath again."

Garet grinned as Ivan's face reddened, noticing Isaac trying to hide the smile on his face. "Fine," Ivan said, grabbing both of their hands. "Here goes nothing."

As the boy closed his eyes, Garet could feel him channeling his Psynergy. He felt the power surrounding him gather and condense around the Jupiter Adept. It absorbed into his body and pulsed back outward in waves, growing steadily stronger, but after a few seconds it stopped.

Giving his hand a squeeze, Garet said, "Come on, Ivan. You can do this. I know you can. You don't want to chase me down naked any more than I do."

Ivan smiled this time, nodding. "Alright, let me try again." The waves returned, washing over Garet, and this time, he could feel his body becoming lighter and thinner, until suddenly, it vanished completely.

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The sudden appearance of a bright light burned at Sheba's eyes through her eyelids. She rubbed at the red glow feebly and groaned, earning a gasp from whoever had brought the light.

"Sheba! You're awake!"

She recognized the voice of her mother and cracked open her eyes, trying to let them adjust. She turned away from the windows, where her mother had apparently opened the curtains, finding the direct sunlight too much for her. Judging from the light pouring into her room, it had to be late morning or early afternoon. That was odd, as she rarely slept so late. "Why'd you let me sleep so long?"

She felt her bed compress slightly as her mother sat next to her, placing her hand on Sheba's head. "Honey, you've been asleep for almost a day."

Confusion ran through the girl's head until the memory suddenly returned. "How- oh!" She shot straight up, her eyes snapping wide open, despite the searing sensation it brought. "Javen! Where's Javen? Is he okay? Did he-"

Zahara shushed her daughter with a finger to her lips. "He's fine. Everyone's fine. You're the only one that got hurt."

Sheba laid back, closing her eyes again. "I messed up. I forgot about the stupid beacon."

"No, what you did was very brave," her mother said, leaning forward to hug the girl. "We're all very, very proud of what you did. Situations like this are why you have your powers, so that you can use them to protect others."

She said nothing for a few moments, trying to think back, but the whole incident was fuzzy. The details were gone; all she could remember clearly was the searing lightning strikes, the fierce desire to protect Javen, and the nauseating feeling of Venus' beacon. Just the thought of it made her stomach turn over again, though she suspected a few moments later that it was just hunger.

Her mother shook her head at her request to go get food. "You need some more rest. I'll bring you some."

"Mom, I've slept for almost a day. I'm fine."

"Your food is coming," Zahara said again, opening the door. "In the meantime, though, some visitors would like to see you. They've been very concerned."

Sheba made a face. "Unless it's Javen or dad, I'm not really in the mood."

"Oh?" The woman glanced back over her shoulder as she stepped outside, raising an eyebrow with a smile. "Well, Felix will be sorry to hear that."

This time, Sheba's stomach did somersaults. "Felix?"

Her mother vanished from the doorway, but she was quickly replaced by a tall, brown-haired man. "I can always come back when you're in the mood," he said, a small smirk playing about his face.

The sheets flew aside as Sheba leaped from her bed, crossing the gap to the door before Felix even had the opportunity to blink, ensnaring the man in a tight hug. After a moment, she felt his arms return the hug. "I can't believe you're here! I was-"

With a sudden horror, Sheba realized she had no idea what she was wearing, if anything at all. Releasing Felix and stepping back, she looked down to find the only thing on her other than her underclothes was an oversized shirt that she frequently wore to bed. Blushing furiously, she quickly asked, "Um, who else is here?"

Her response came in the form of a burgundy-haired girl flying into her, much in the same way she had flown into Felix. "Sheba Sheba Sheba Sheba Sheba!" Jenna shouted, picking the girl up as she hugged her.

"I hope you're not out of bed, Sheba," her mother's voice called in through the window. Jenna reluctantly put the girl back down, allowing her to quietly sneak back into her bed before calling out that, yes, of course she was.

"What are you guys doing here?" she asked.

Jenna put her hands on her hips. "What, can't we stop in for a visit without being interrogated?"

"Hah hah," Sheba said dryly. "You're supposed to be in Tolbi right now. You didn't come because I got hurt, did you? It's nothing bad."

"Actually, we didn't even know you were hurt until we got here," Felix said. "We did hear about the attack on Venus Lighthouse, though, so we came to make sure you were okay and find out what really happened."

The girl shrugged. "No idea. A lightning storm just dropped out of nowhere. You said the lighthouse was attacked, though? By who?"

Felix shook his head. "Also no idea. You weren't the only area struck. Tolbi had enormous lightning bolts rained down on it, and we think similar storms happened at the other lighthouses."

Pulling up her knees under the sheet, Sheba leaned onto them. "Looks like I missed a bunch in just a day. This all happened late yesterday morning?"

Nodding, Jenna said, "That's not even the half of it. Guess who decided to show up to Colosso yesterday?"

After realizing that Jenna actually wanted her to guess, Sheba thought about it for a moment. "Piers?"

"No, the old man is still avoiding us. Close, though."

"...Conservato?"

"Ew, no."

"Uh, Mia?"

"Nope, but closer. The others are actually checking on her right now, though."

Sheba frowned. "Puelle?"

"Getting further away."

"Jenna, I have no idea. Just tell me."

Obviously ready to burst with the news anyway, Jenna practically blurted out, "Alex!"

Sheba sat upright. "What? He's alive?"

"Apparently," Felix said. "He showed up, trying to take something from Isaac, but the storm separated us. We were lucky, in a way. He's definitely become very strong. He can use all types of Psynergy now."

Her mouth dropping open, Sheba said, "What? Like, completely? I know you can learn some weak skills of other elements with a lot of training, but..."

"Years of training, actually," Felix corrected. "Saturos once told me it took him the better part of his life to learn how to use Venus to heal himself. He said it was one of the most challenging things he ever did, and he was one of the most gifted Adepts I've met."

"But Alex had it all," Jenna said. "He even held Felix to the ground with gravity – his own element."

"Well, he won't next time," Felix said, crossing his arms. "I'm not about to put up with his intrigues again."

"Hear hear!" Jenna cheered. "Dibs on getting to punch him in the face!"

Sheba laughed, then fell silent as her mother returned with three bowls of potato soup, giving one to each of them and then leaving again. The girl sipped at hers slowly, thinking about the turn of events. If they had not come to Lalivero, she would not even know about Alex, let alone about the other lightning storms. How many more had there been? What would have happened to everyone if she *had* gone to Colosso, instead of being there to protect them?

"You're looking very thoughtful, Sheba," Felix said suddenly.

"Just wondering about some what-ifs," she said, shaking her head. "Those don't matter. However, what we *are* doing does, so...what are we doing?"

Felix and Jenna looked at each other, then back at Sheba. "What do you mean 'we'?" Felix asked. "You're-"

"Felix, if the next words out of your mouth are 'staying here' or 'staying in bed', then I swear to Procne, you will find these storms very insignificant compared to what I will do to you."

He frowned at her. "I was going to say you're certainly not up to traveling just yet, but if your body is in the same condition as your mouth, then you have the fastest recovery time of anyone I've ever met."

"You bet I do," she said, grabbing the sheets to throw them back, then stopping suddenly.

"What?" Jenna asked.

Sheba blushed. "Um, I need to get dressed."

Jenna giggled, grabbing Felix by the arm. "We'll be waiting outside."

Sheba waited until the door was closed, then jumped out of bed and began changing, stopping only once in order to pinch herself. After she verified that it was not a dream, she let her emotions soar once more. Felix had come to take her away from Lalivero! She'd spent months wishing for something like this to happen, although she could have done without the lightning storm. She began quietly humming to herself as she pulled a shirt over her head.

"You're leaving, aren't you?"

The humming instantly stopped as she spun to the window, finding Javen sitting in it, looking at the ground. Sheba said nothing; she could not very well deny it, but the words to explain it escaped her. She did nothing to mask the guilt on her face, not while looking at his expression of betrayal. Before she could find something to say, he disappeared back out the window.

The girl stood in silence for several minutes, staring out the empty window. For so long she had hoped that someone, anyone would come and bring her away from Lalivero. She always watched her fantasies from her own view, as she left the town laughing and excited for what was to come.

Never had she looked from the view of those left behind. Her parents would normally have been reluctant in letting her leave, but with her injury only a day before? They'd never let her leave at the moment, and if she was after the source of the storm that had caused the injury, possibly not at all. She had always found Faran and Zahara reasonable people, but in the end, they were still parents and would not willingly let their daughter walk into such danger.

And Javen...she had promised him she would always come back to him, but that did not diminish the feeling of loss he would feel until she returned. Remembering her own feelings when the others had left her in Lalivero, she suddenly understood his own feelings. Her words would only temper his pain with the hope of her return, but that would take time for him to get past the loss.

She would need to leave now, and leave quietly. Lalivero did not hold Felix in very high regard, despite Sheba's insistence on his good nature, and if she tried to leave with their knowledge, they would accuse him of foolishly placing her in harm's way.

After pulling on the remainder of her clothes, she went to her desk and began rummaging through it, finally pulling out some paper, ink, and a reed pen. She quickly scribbled down her plan and reason for leaving now, making sure to emphasize that it was *her* decision to do this, and that she knew how risky it was. Satisfied, she threw a bag on her bed and began throwing some spare clothes into it.

"Good gods, you move like a fugitive," Jenna said, poking her head back in, then motioning to Felix. "What's going on?"

"We're sneaking out," Sheba said, grabbing up the necklace of seashells Javen had made for her and placing it around her neck. "The entire town will try to stop me, and with good reason. We're probably crazy for doing this."

Jenna nodded, then grinned. "Downright insane, I'd say. What's new?"

Sheba could not help but smile in return, glancing around her room one last time. Seeing nothing that she felt necessary to take, she nodded to the others. "I'm ready. If we move carefully, but quickly, we should be able to get out before anyone realizes we're leaving. I've already left a note, so let's go."

Felix shook his head. "No need, we've got a better way." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a blue gem and tossed it to Jenna.

Sheba eyed the jewel with surprise. "You convinced Ivan to give up his most precious possession?"

Rolling her eyes, Jenna said, "Like he ever uses it anyway. No, we're hoping he figured out how to do it without the lapis, since we grabbed it to come here."

Slightly surprised at Ivan's accomplishment, Sheba pushed the question aside for a more important one. "Are you sure you guys are fine to teleport again?" she asked with concern.

"We've been here since just after dawn," Felix said. "We didn't want to wake you up, but we waited to make sure you were okay."

"Oh," she said, trying to hide her slight embarrassment. "Well, let's not do it in here. Everything will go everywhere. Outside would be better."

Felix nodded, stepping towards her when she tried to shoulder her bag. "No. I've got it."

"Oh," Sheba said again, failing this time. "Um, thank you Felix."

He said nothing, simply turning towards the door, but then stopped. She peered around him and found Javen standing in the doorway, staring at Felix with his arms stretched to the side, blocking passage.

"Javen?" she said quietly.

"You're not taking her away again," her brother said in the same tone. "I won't let you."

Felix's head turned ever so slightly, glancing at Sheba out of the very corner of his eye, then turned completely back towards Javen. "Would you stop me, then?"

Javen nodded furiously. "I'll kill you if I have to."

Sheba gasped. "Javen! You shouldn't say that!"

Felix shook his head. "No, that's exactly what I wanted to hear. That's the attitude a brother should take towards his sister, even if she's the older one." He crouched down to look Javen in the eye. "See that other girl, Jenna? She's my little sister. If someone ever tried to hurt her, I would find them and pull them apart piece by piece.

"He's why I can't bring boys home," Jenna whispered to Sheba, but the other girl ignored her.

"I understand why you're doing this, Javen," Felix continued, not having heard his sister. "I know exactly how you feel. I can only promise you, as one brother to another, that Sheba is as much a sister to me as she is to you. If anyone hurt her, I would hunt them to the ends of Weyard and beyond."

Javen stared at him for a moment. Sheba wanted desperately to say something, but knew she should not interrupt. The boy asked, "Why do you need her, then? Why can't she stay here?"

"Your sister is special, Javen. She's strong, smart, cunning, and she can do amazing things. We need to go find a very bad person, and I need her help to stop him. If I didn't absolutely need her, I wouldn't even let her come."

By now, Sheba had forgotten to breathe. She knew Javen obviously could not stop Felix and that Felix would never hurt Javen, but the last thing she wanted to do was leave Javen behind with such negative feelings. It was important that she leave with his permission; she doubted he would get over her departure if she did not.

"You jumped off the lighthouse when she fell, didn't you?"

Felix nodded.

They looked at each other for a few more moments, then the boy dropped his arms and stepped to the side. "Don't let anything happen to her," he whispered.

Solemnly nodding again, Felix stood. "I would die for her, Javen."

The boy looked over to Sheba, and when she spread her arms, he came running into them, his wet face burying itself into her shoulder. "I told you, Javen," she said softly. "I'll always come back. No one can keep me away from you. You're my brother, and I love you more than anything." She pulled him away and looked him in the eyes. "I need you to be strong for mom and dad. They're going to need you. Make sure to tell them that I love them, too."

She stood back up, smiling down at Javen. He wiped his eyes and returned the smile, weak though it was. "I love you, Sheba. Will you tell me about your trip when you get back?"

"I'll tell you everything," she said. Looking up to Felix, she nodded.

He returned the nod and stepped outside, glancing around quickly. Seeing no one close to them, he motioned for them to follow. He grabbed onto Jenna's empty hand, while Sheba touched her arm, turning to watch Javen. With one final wave to her brother, she felt the Psynergy break down her body into particles as she raced through the air.

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Ivan experienced the wondrous and terrifying feeling of being weightless for about three seconds before he crashed into a snow bank. Some distance away he heard Isaac and Garet experience a similar fate.

He quickly pulled himself out, bending over and retching, though nothing came up. Nothing ever did. They would simply dry heave for a few moments and continue on with a very persistent nausea for several hours. It never advanced to actual vomiting, though, unless aggravated by something they did. Jenna had unwittingly taught them that lesson once; none had ever forgotten it.

Ivan set about brushing the snow off before it could melt and leave his clothes wet, though some managed to sneak into the gaps. He could feel the ice melting in the small of his back, settling into his underclothes with an uncomfortable chill. Sighing, he brushed the last of it away, then turned to the other two. "Sorry," he said with a shrug.

Garet shot him a dirty look, wincing and arching his back, likely for the same reason as Ivan. "Could you have got us any further away?"

Raising an eyebrow, Ivan simply said, "Can you feel Mercury?" Garet nodded. "Then consider yourself close enough. Now excuse me while I heave air."

Ivan saw Isaac grin as he bent over again, feeling like the pressure in his throat would burst if nothing continued to come up, but eventually it subsided once more and settled into that mood-fouling nausea. "Something funny?" he asked, a bit more acidly than he wanted.

"You," Isaac said. "Whatever Garet might say, you just teleported us all the way across Angara by yourself. If that's not one of the greatest milestones in Psynergy we've seen, I don't know what would be."

"Finding a cure for this stupid sickness would be a pretty good one."

Isaac rubbed his own stomach, his grin half-turning into a grimace. "True enough, I suppose. Still impressive, though."

"Hey, I'm wet, cold, and feeling like crap," Garet said. "It looks like we've still got about an hour's walk to Imil, so can we get going?"

As they began their steady trudge across the tundra, Ivan thought more about what Isaac had said. His initial irritability fading, he realized just how much of an accomplishment this really was. None of them had ever thought they could use the skills of the alchemy tools without them. How had they not discovered this on some simpler skill? Each of them had mentioned before that teleportation exceeded everything else they could in complication, yet it had been the first to be accomplished without a tool.

Ivan felt a small surge of pride that accompanied the surprise. True, he had not thought it possible, yet he had been the one to perform it! He had realized early on that he utilized Psynergy more efficiently and effectively than Isaac or Garet; he eventually learned that only Sheba could match him in that area.

His mind turned to the side, now whirring in an almost mechanical fashion. Everything in the world was comprised of the four elements, and that included Psynergy. However, as they had learned, Psynergy was not simply broken down into the simple four elements; each element had numerous subdivisions that they controlled, and every now and then they stumbled across them, usually from the alchemy tools. Who could have guessed that teleportation was governed by Jupiter?

The gears ticked once more.

Bending down, Ivan scooped up a handful of the snow, feeling the cold through his gloves. The last snowfall must have been a wet one, judging by the sticky quality of the snow. Perfect. Packing it into a rough sphere, he pulled back and hurled the ball. It took a small adjustment of wind to correct his aim, but the projectile hit its ultimate goal: the back of Garet's head.

"Wha-!" He spluttered briefly, spinning around and finding Ivan standing still, staring straight at him. "Oh, you've asked for it now." Scooping up his own handful of snow, Garet launched it straight towards the other boy, needing no improvement of his aim.

Ivan made no motion other than to raise his hand, channeling the Psynergy that pulsed from his mind. Just before it reached him, the snowball suddenly stopped in midair. Garet said nothing, watching with curiosity, as did Isaac. Ivan reached out to the snowball, touching it gently, then wrapped his hand around it and held it for several seconds.

"What is it?" Isaac asked.

In response, Ivan pulled his hand back, then leaned in to inspect the snow. "It didn't melt. Not at all. I couldn't squeeze or move it, either." Stepping around it, he dispersed his Psynergy and the snowball resumed moving as if it had never stopped, whiffing through the air and landing back in the snow.

Garet understood. "You don't have the Halt Gem, do you?"

Ivan shook his head. "Isaac got me thinking. I wanted to see what else I could do."

"So...you can stop time?" Isaac asked, folding his arms. "That's pretty useful."

Shrugging, Ivan said, "It's got limited usefulness. You can't actually affect the stopped object at all, not even move it. And you have to constantly maintain it stopped. And I'm sure it's much harder on anything living, like pretty much all Psynergy is."

"Hmm..." Isaac clicked his tongue thoughtfully. "Still useful against stuff like that, being thrown at you. And maybe you can control other aspects of time? You know, slowing it down or speeding it up?"

"Not sure," Ivan said. "I'll look into it, though. Some other time. I really don't want to exert myself too much right now."

They resumed their uneven march, but Garet slipped back to come alongside Ivan. The blond cringed slightly, expecting a handful of snow down his back for his transgression. Garet shook his head, though. "Don't worry, you're safe. I see why you did it, and you've learned something that will be really useful."

Ivan relaxed, his shoulders slumping down from their hunched position, but then a large arm clapped down across them. *"However,"* Garet continued, "that doesn't mean I can let it slide. You're safe for now, but someday, somewhere, I'm going to get you back for that. And when I do, you'll remember this conversation and know that you've earned it." He shot the smaller boy an enormous smile, which Ivan returned weakly.

For the remainder of the trip to Imil, the nausea in his stomach had been eclipsed by the small knot of terror, the kind that only appears when one knows something inevitable had begun its countdown. Ivan wondered briefly

whether or not this was the same feeling those with fatal illnesses felt.

He suspected the two were very similar.

By the time they arrived in the snowy city, the feeling had vanished, replaced by a vague sense of unease. As the three passed by the first houses, Ivan noticed the serene silence surrounding them.

"Where is everyone?" he asked softly, more to point out the oddity than to get an answer.

"It's the middle of winter," Isaac said. "People get sick easier in winter. They're probably inside."

The explanation was a reasonable one, but it did not convince Ivan, the unease continuing to gnaw at him. There were a number of reasonable explanations; perhaps there had been a festival in another part of the town? Perhaps the people in this area had simply gotten together at a single house?

But the more they walked, the more Ivan became convinced that the explanation was *not* a reasonable one. When he voiced these concerns to Isaac, the Venus Adept pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I don't know," he said finally. "Let's find Mia. She should have some answers."

"Someone else might, too," Garet said suddenly, pointing ahead. "Look."

Ivan did, and he saw a black smudge in the snow. With a sudden jolt, he realized the smudge was a person, collapsed, and partially covered in snow. In moments they had reached the person and Isaac bent over him, rolling the man over

carefully. He placed his hands on the man's chest, frowned, then leaned in close to his face.

"He's breathing," Isaac said after a few seconds. "Slowly, but he's breathing. And there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with him, either."

Crossing his arms, Garet said, "He's lying unconscious in the middle of a frozen street. I might be wrong, but I'm pretty sure that means something's wrong with him."

"Your wit is as sharp as your looks, Garet," Ivan said dryly, prompting a grin from the Mars Adept. "Physically, he's fine?"

Isaac shook his head. "I think he has some frostbite, but I can't really tell. I know he has no injuries, though."

"We need to get him inside," Garet said. "Then we go for Mia. She knows how to handle that stuff."

"Agreed," Isaac said. "You get the feet."

As the two Valeans picked up the man, Ivan walked ahead of them to the nearest house. He knocked twice, calling out, "Hello? We need some help." He waited a few seconds, then knocked again, more forcefully. "Hello? Is anyone there?" Getting no response again, he reached down and tried the handle, finding the door unlocked.

He quickly realized why no one had answered.

"Guys, we've got a bit of a problem," he said as the others approached.

"What?" Garet said. "Come on, move out of the way, this guy's heavy." The boy obediently stepped aside. "Thanks,

now- oh what the hell is this?"

"Tried telling you," Ivan said grimly. Inside the house lay an elderly woman on her side, lying on the hallway floor. Ivan followed Isaac and Garet in, where they lay the man on the carpet beside the woman, then glanced into the adjoining room.

"Another in here," Isaac said, walking in and crouching down by a collapsed adolescent. "Same condition, minus the frostbite. Perfectly fine."

Ivan walked past him and peered into the kitchen, then yelped in shock. "Isaac... There's...there's..." he swallowed and took a deep breath. "There's blood everywhere."

Stepping past him into the kitchen, Isaac found what Ivan had once again seen enough of. A large pool of blood had radiated outward from another woman's head, spreading across the wooden floor. Her blond hair lay strewn wildly about it, much of it matted together with the crusty rust of dried blood. Isaac crouched next to her as Garet looked around the kitchen and Ivan fought back the nausea that had nothing to do with his teleportation sickness.

"She's alive too," Isaac said. "In fact, she's also relatively fine. It's a cut on her head, but it's clotted up on it's own."

Garet nodded, pointing at the table's corner, where Ivan could see a slight red smear and a few golden hairs. "Yep, right here. Must've fallen onto it."

"But why is there so much blood?" Ivan asked.

"Scalp cut." Isaac tapped the top of his head, looking at the table. "They bleed really bad, but usually look worse than they are. Garet's got the right of it, she had to have fallen."

"Did the others just fall, too?"

Isaac looked at him sharply. "The sass isn't appreciated, Ivan."

Ivan felt himself redden shamefully and looked at the ground. "...Sorry."

"Let's get going," Garet said. "I don't like this. We need to find Mia."

Isaac nodded his agreement and stepped out of the kitchen, Ivan following silently. He hadn't meant to be so degrading, he thought as they walked outside. This feeling, this unease, had not abated upon discovery of what had happened to the Imilians, and it kept him on edge.

He shook his head, pushing the excuses away. The attitude had not been needed, regardless of his feelings, but he would need to wait before he properly apologized to Isaac. The strange state of the town needed to be investigated first.

They walked by more houses as the town grew more dense, nearing the center, and Ivan began peering into several windows. Inside most of the houses, he found a similar scene: people simply lying on the ground, assuming them to be breathing as well. If not, well, they were beyond help.

"Wait," Garet said, throwing out his arm, then pointing down. Ivan saw a set of footprints in the fresh snow. "Those are new. Very new. As in today. Someone here is still walking."

"Should we follow the footprints or go to Mia?" Ivan asked, both he and Garet looking to Isaac.

"To Mia," Isaac said without hesitation. "Her house isn't far. We can follow those after we make sure she's safe."

To Ivan's surprise, though, the choice had been irrelevant; the set of footprints led straight to the door of Mia's house. His stomach knotted again, but he steeled himself. None of them readied weapons as they approached the door, silent as the town, but they all cleared their minds.

When they threw open the door, they found Alex waiting.

He sat on the edge of her bed, looking up at them with a general disinterest. As they moved to strike, he held up one finger in warning, then pointed behind him. Lying on the bed, eyes closed, was Mia. She looked like all the others they had seen, though she had been placed under the covers.

Ivan's lightning faded from the forefront of his mind, but hung around the back, waiting to be called upon. "What are you doing here?" he nearly shouted.

"You show up in Tolbi and lightning destroys the city," Garet said, his hand automatically settling on his sword hilt. "Now you show up in Imil and everyone is practically dead. If you're not the one doing it, which I don't entirely believe anymore, then you're a walking jinx."

An amused look appeared on Alex's face. "I suppose it's outside the realm of possibility that I might have suspected something had happened here, of course."

"Yeah, I'm not putting much faith in that one."

"Oh? So, then, what are you doing here, then?"

Garet shook his head. "That *is* why-"

Isaac cut him off. "Enough, Alex. We're not here so you can dance around us with your words. Why are you here? You know perfectly well you have no right to be."

For a moment, Ivan saw Alex's expression flicker, before settling back into his usual smirk. "This is *my* hometown, Isaac. I have more right to be here than you."

"You betrayed your hometown. Betrayed Mia."

"Like you betrayed yours?"

Isaac opened his mouth, paused, then shut it again, looking away from Alex. Ivan stepped forward. "Stop it. Answer the question, Alex."

Alex shrugged, as if he had simply been seeing how long he could distract them. "I already told you. I'm here for the same reason you are."

"Then you didn't cause any of this?" Ivan asked.

"What, this sleep? No."

Garet scoffed. "Sleep? You think all these people just fell asleep?"

Alex looked at him neutrally. "Why ask me? Ask your personal expert."

His gaze returned to Ivan, as did Garet's and Isaac's. He felt his face redden slightly. "How am I supposed to know?"

Standing up, Alex motioned to Mia's unmoving form as he stepped back. "If you don't have the capability, then I must be severely overestimating your skill. It took me only a matter of days to learn how to gaze with the eye of Jupiter."

Ivan stepped forward slowly, shifting his eyes between Alex and Mia. As he reached the side of the bed, he gave Alex one long, last cautious look, still wondering if the whole thing was a trap of some sort. Deciding that Alex could have attacked them at any point, he turned to Mia, casting aside his normal sight. Mia's body was replaced by a brilliant luminosity that dazzled Ivan through the bleak room. In addition to the sharp colors her body now radiated, she glowed with a bright blue aura.

Ivan recognized the aura, both having seen it on Mia before and on others. It was the unmistakeable mark of an Adept touched by the power of Mercury. Curious, he turned his head, looking at Alex. The man appeared in the same sharp brilliance that his clansman had, yet his aura eddied around him unstably, a mix of blue, purple, and yellow.

"See anything interesting?" he heard Alex's voice taunt, sending color rippling across his vision.

He turned back to Mia, seeing her through the thick blankets that had been laid over her body. He could see nothing unusual at first, only seeing her as healthy, like Isaac had already established as the norm. Moving back up to her face, he noticed a subtle movement and leaned in.

From Mia's head came a ripple, spreading outward like a halo until it faded, followed by another. Even now, Ivan could not quite *see* these ripples; they appeared as if someone had thrown a pebble into the still water of reality itself. At once, he understood the meaning of these rhythmic ripples and stepped back, returning his sight to normal.

"He's right," Ivan said. "She's sleeping. It's deep, but it's definitely sleep. It's..." He paused, thinking about what his

next words meant. "...It's similar to the way I put things to sleep. In fact, I think it's the same, just deeper."

Alex clapped his hands twice. "Good job. Your mind will take you far, Ivan. It is indeed Jupiter Psynergy that put Imil to sleep, as it was Jupiter Psynergy that rained lightning on Tolbi. But how can two such powerful spells be cast almost simultaneously in two entirely different areas? And how could such power be generated?"

"It has to be someone powerful," Ivan said. "More powerful than us."

"Ah, not quite," Alex said, wagging his finger. "No, this is quite beyond the abilities of any Adept, even myself. At least, an Adept drawing upon his own power. Can you think of a way for an Adept to draw limitless power?"

"Sneaking off to steal the Golden Sun?" Garet shot.

Sighing, Alex said quietly, "If only." At a more normal volume he said, "Also no. Did I not just say that I'm not capable of this? Where would one have to be in order to gather Jupiter energy of this magnitude many times over?"

Now Ivan understood. "Jupiter Lighthouse. They're drawing power from the beacon, from the very essence of all Jupiter Psynergy."

"Correct," Alex said, beaming. "I stopped in Contigo before coming here and found something very interesting."

"And what is that?" Isaac asked.

"The moon," Alex said, smirking at the look of horror emerging on Ivan's face. "Anemos has once again landed on Weyard."

Chapter 4: Emotional Outbursts

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 4 – Emotional Outbursts

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Flames burst throughout a throne room, hurling a body across it in an explosion that shook the very stones themselves. The fire cast everything into an orange hue, a cataclysmic sunset for one of the two combatants' lives.

Garet stepped forward as the flames died, leaving a light, hazy smoke lingering in the air. His armored boots echoed across the room's stone floor as he advanced slowly and methodically. Sunlight fell upon the deep green armor that adorned his entire body, giving him the appearance of a bronze statue weathered by time, long since covered in verdigris.

Before him on the ground lay a woman, blond hair plastered to her head in sweat and blood. Her mouth moved madly as she glared up at the Mars Adept, but no sound came forth. One hand reached up to wipe away the blood that had dribbled down the corner of her mouth, flinging it onto the floor ahead of her.

Shifting his enormous sword to one hand, Garet held up the other as bright, white flames swirled around it, making shadows dance across the crevasses of his armor. As the woman looked up at the flames longingly, Garet smiled coldly, his mouth moving in a inaudible taunt.

The woman attempted to scream something more, but the silent words sputtered and fell out of her mouth, spit flying in her fury. She eventually descended into a fit of very audible coughing, great, ragged heaves that tore themselves from her chest, her body collapsing back onto the stones.

Garet watched the display, his sword shifting back into both hands. His face blazed down at her exhausted form with an uncharacteristic fury, his teeth grinding into each other. Finally he pulled them apart long enough to speak back, though he hid none of the hatred in his expression.

Her face snapped up to stare at him once more, a cruel smile curling her lips upwards to reveal teeth now coated in blood. She spoke again, shaking her head slowly as she did, her arms struggling to hold her body off the ground.

Shaking his head, Garet hefted up his sword. He cast one final glance at the woman as she began to laugh, his eyes widening in frenzy. His grip tightened so much that, had his green gauntlets not been covering them, his knuckles would have been white enough to reflect the sunlight itself.

The sword dropped, shearing through the air with the combined force of gravity and muscle, ready to rend the woman's head from her body in a single blow. Before it could connect, though, a voice spoke, belonging to neither of the two.

"*Well, isn't this convenient?"*

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"Anemos?" Isaac repeated. "They're those Jupiter Adepts that ripped themselves out of the world, right?"

Alex nodded. "You remember learning about them in Contigo. You've even been traveling with one of their descendants for almost two years now."

Isaac glanced over at Ivan, who ignored the comment. "So the moon actually was Anemos, then?" he asked instead.

Rather than responding verbally, Alex simply pointed out the window. Isaac followed his finger and found the faded, white disk of Luna hanging in the blue sky, waxing towards full. So that particular legend of Anemos had not been true, obviously.

"As much as I want to know what the hell's going on," Garet said, "Mia needs to be woken up."

"And everyone else," Ivan added. "Why haven't you done that already?"

"It's a...delicate situation," Alex said slowly.

Isaac stared at him. "So stop being evasive and explain it."

The Mercury Adept raised an eyebrow. "Demanding, aren't we?" When Isaac opened his mouth to respond, Alex shook his head. "I am not exactly in Mia's good graces at the moment. I wanted to decide how best to approach the inevitable confrontation when she woke."

"Couldn't find one, could you?" Garet asked, a smirk working into his face.

"No," Alex admitted. "I'd begun to think that there simply was no good approach. But now, if you are going to, ah, force my hand, I suppose I shall have to make do."

Isaac had seen Mia wake people from an unnatural slumber before and had once commented on how much time and effort it took. "At that deep of a sleep, it's closer to reviving someone from unconsciousness," she had said. Isaac had been surprised, but understood well the strength she had used.

When Alex pointed his hand at Mia, though, Isaac felt nothing more than a brief, potent burst of Psynergy before Mia's eyes opened and she rubbed at them groggily. Yawning, she threw back the covers and sat up on the side of the bed, then stopped suddenly, looking at herself in confusion. When she looked back up, she finally noticed the others. "...Isaac? What's going on?"

Isaac did not respond, but simply fixed his gaze on Alex. Ivan and Garet did the same, and Mia's eyes followed soon after, her hands flying to her mouth and smothering a gasp. "Alex!"

He managed a warm smile for the first time since Isaac had met him. "That seems to be the common reaction to me as of late."

Mia stood up quickly, found her balance unsteady, and fell back onto the bed. "You're alive?" she whispered.

He spread his arms in a 'here I am' gesture. "Never better, actually."

Now looking between him and the others in confusion, Mia asked the questions that had first entered her mind. "What's going on? Why are you all here? Why am I in bed like this? What happened?"

"You were put to sleep by a powerful Psynergy," Ivan said. "We came up here to check on you. All of us, apparently," he

added, looking at Alex again.

"I can probably explain better," Alex said, settling against a large, hardwood wardrobe and crossing his arms. "As I've just informed your friends, Mia, the long-lost civilization of Anemos has returned to the world. They landed in their original location, near Contigo, yesterday afternoon. Do you remember them?"

Mia nodded slowly. "You taught me about them. Them and several others. The Ankhol, the Lemurians, the Tund-"

"The others aren't important," Alex interrupted, though calmly. "The Anemoi are the issue. Upon their re-entry to Weyard, they stopped at Jupiter Lighthouse, making use of the power there to attack several cities. We know Tolbi and somewhere by Venus Lighthouse, probably Lalivero, were struck with lightning storms. Imil seems to have been struck with a sleeping spell, one of enormous proportions."

"A...sleeping spell?" Mia asked.

"Yes, one that covered the entire town," he said. "Everyone is asleep, and has been for about...oh, probably a full day."

Mia tried standing up again, this time more slowly, and found her balance. "We need to get them, then. Those who fell outside will have spent the night in the cold!"

Alex waved his hand. "There's no need to rush, Mia. The damage has already been done. All we can do now is help recover from it."

Shaking her head, Mia said, "No. I'm taking care of these people *now.* They are my charge, and even if you no longer want that responsibility, I do."

"Do you, Mia?" Alex asked softly. "Do you really?"

She fixed him with a level gaze. "Wake them, Alex. You have that power now, don't you? Do it."

He shrugged in response, then waved his hand. Isaac felt a much more significant wave of Psynergy rush past him, leaving him feeling refreshed, though unfortunately, it did nothing to quell the slight nausea that still nestled in his stomach.

"We'll continue this later," Mia said, then turned to the others. "Will you come help me?"

Garet and Ivan immediately consented, but Isaac hesitated. "Can you give me a few minutes? I have something I need to discuss with Alex."

Mia looked dubious, but made no attempt to discourage him. "Find us after, then."

After the three had walked out, Alex turned to Isaac. "To what do I owe this honor, o great Warrior of Vale?"

"Stow it, Alex," Isaac snapped. "I don't know what you're playing at this time, but it won't happen."

"I'm not playing at anything, Isaac," he replied in a reasonable tone, but Isaac knew better than to believe him.

"I'm sure. You want me to just turn around right now so you can stab me in the back and get it over with?"

"Ah," Alex said, nodding. "You're talking about *that.* I suppose I owe you an explanation."

Isaac crossed his arms, leaning against the door. "It'd be nice. Not every day someone comes back from the dead to try and kill me."

"Kill you? Oh no, Isaac, I never intended to kill you. If I had, you would be dead."

"Then why did you attack me?"

Alex shrugged. "You have something I need."

"Yeah, we covered that yesterday," Isaac said flatly. "Did the Golden Sun take away your ability to ask for things?"

Chuckling, Alex said, "This isn't something you can give. And besides, would you really have just given me what I asked for? The man who, I'm sure you believe, tricked you all into lighting the lighthouses for himself?"

"Are you about to try and deny that?"

"Yes and no," Alex said, pausing for a moment. "While I most certainly desired the Golden Sun, I'd begun planning the lighting of the lighthouses before I even knew about its existence. Saturos came to me before I could finish plans, so I added my strength to his. I knew Alchemy needed to be released, Isaac. I did that as much for the world as for the Golden Sun."

"How noble," the blond said sarcastically.

Alex nodded graciously, ignoring the sarcasm. "However, when the time came for me to achieve my personal goal, there was a slight...mishap." Isaac raised an eyebrow but said nothing, waiting for Alex to continue. "Your dear guardian, the Wise One, interfered."

"Yeah, he does that," Isaac said.

"And, somehow," Alex continued, giving Isaac a reproachful look for the interruption, "he transferred part of the Golden Sun's power to you."

Isaac's mind tripped over itself. What? "...You'll have to run that by me again."

"He fixed things so that, when the Golden Sun rose, it imbued you with the Mars portion, rather than me," Alex explained. "As such, I am left with a rather incomplete control of Alchemy – Mercury, Jupiter, and Venus are mine to command, but Mars still eludes me."

"I think you're wrong," Isaac said slowly. "I've never felt anything different, but wouldn't that mean I'm able to use Mars Psynergy?"

"I believe it would, yes."

"Well, I can't."

"Have you ever tried?"

He had a point, Isaac realized. He had never bothered trying to use other Psynergy types. Kraden had taught them from the beginning that, other than very basic techniques, it was impossible. But wouldn't he have felt something, anything?

Though, he had been rather occupied at the time the Golden Sun rose. He had felt the surge of Mars Psynergy flooding him, but he had felt a similar feeling at Venus when it had been lit. Had he just been distracted enough to not notice a difference between the two? Or was the similar feeling of Mars, not his innate element, the indication of his receipt of such power?

"So this is what you were after?" he asked. "So you could complete the Golden Sun?"

Alex nodded. "Precisely. Extracting it might have caused some pain, perhaps, but left you exactly as you were before. I'd simply be taking away a gift you didn't even know that you'd been given."

"For what? What do you need it for? You want to rule the world?"

"Of course not," Alex said, shaking his head. "What do you take me for, some simple-minded villain in a child's story? Ruling the world is a goal only fools reach for."

"Then what?"

"My reasons are my own," he said. "However, I assure you, they are entirely altruistic."

Isaac scoffed. "Of course they are. That's why you won't tell me them, right? You wouldn't want me to stop you from doing something good for the world."

"You tried once, after all."

"Yeah, I get it," Isaac said sharply. "Yes, I was ill-informed about the way the world worked. You, in all of your all-knowing glory, recognized the danger the world was in and made the hard choices to save it."

The smirk returned to Alex's face, along with Isaac's urge to slam his fist into it. "My, you sound a bit defensive about that, Isaac. Do I sense bitterness?"

"Stop changing the subject."

"I already told you, my intentions are my own. If those are the only answers you seek, then our discussion is at an end."

Alex moved towards Isaac, who steadfastly remained in front of the door. The Imilian came to a stop in front of him and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

Isaac stared at him for a moment, then said, "The Golden Sun. Weren't you going to take it, then?"

Smiling, Alex said, "Before yesterday, it was all I could think of. Even my dreams led me to Colosso, to you. Unfortunately, I believe Weyard is in more jeopardy from the Anemoi than you might think. While I would have considerable power with the full Golden Sun, I think it would be more useful to Weyard for it to remain split for now."

"For now," Isaac echoed.

"Yes," Alex said. "Rest assured, Isaac, once this threat is dealt with, which it will be, I will be taking what is rightfully mine. Until then, though, I believe we will need to be allies, however tenuous that relationship might be."

"Did you want me to shake your hand on this arrangement, or something?"

"Of course not. I expect nothing less than open hostility from all of you bordering on active opposition. But let's not cross that border, please. I think you will all be useful allies to me in this. Or I to you, if you prefer to think of it that way."

Isaac said nothing, simply stepping to the side and letting Alex step past him, leaving the house. Isaac remained still for several minutes, absently gazing around the modestly decorated house. Mia had never been one to collect anything, and her house reflected it. She had the furniture

for living, enough clothing to avoid washing excessively, an important trait in such a cold climate, and little else. The only items in her house that existed for pure decoration were a length of cord, woven into the shape of a heart, and an old drawing of her and Alex playing in the snow that Isaac assumed Alex had done when he was young.

Looking at the drawing pinned to the wall, Isaac realized that this decision was not his to make. Traitor or not, Alex was still a member of the Mercury Clan and Mia's old friend. She knew him better than anyone else, and if anyone should decide whether or not to trust him, it needed to be her.

He knew that no one else would, anyway.

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"Felix, please-"

"No."

"You can't-"

"No."

"But-"

"I said no, Jenna. Stay inside."

Jenna made a sound similar to a pie landing on the ground, placed her hands on her hips, and stuck out her tongue. She wrapped them all together by spinning on her heel and walking away, grabbing the hand of a very confused Sheba as she went.

They marched on in silence through the halls, Jenna fuming so furiously that she was surprised everything around her

had not yet burst into flame. The occasional servant they came across quickly moved to the wall to clear her path. She could hear Sheba muttering apologies to them behind her, but she paid little attention to the girl. She wanted to vent, and there was only one place for it.

She took the stairs two at a time, ignoring Sheba's pleas to slow down. Rounding the next corner and quickly bounding up the next flight, she reached the third floor in record time. Pausing briefly to remember which room she wanted, Sheba caught up and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Jenna, where are we going?"

"We're almost there," she said. "Come on." Gesturing for Sheba to follow, the two moved down the hallway a bit, Jenna stopping at one door, then the next. At the third door, she looked up and down the hall, gauging the distance, then nodded and opened it.

She had chosen correctly; this was the room she had found before Colosso. Though not hers, she had been meaning to move into it. The room itself was unoccupied, simply set up as a guest room. Across the room, though, stood a great, glass door, leading out onto a balcony, one of two on the third floor. Stepping across the room and throwing open the doors, Jenna took only a second to look out into the city.

Then she turned to the railing and climbed up onto it.

She saw surprise seize Sheba's expression. "Wait, Jenna! What are you doing?"

Grinning, the girl said simply, "Going up." She grabbed hold of the decorative floral piece above the balcony and hauled herself up, then turned around, holding out a hand for Sheba. "Come on, I've got you." Taking hold of the other girl

and steadying her grip on the stone vine, she pulled Sheba up without much difficulty.

"Why are we up here?"

"For this."

Walking up the inclined roof, Jenna hit the ridge and walked along it until she found a chimney. Glancing down inside briefly to verify it was not in use, she climbed up onto it, settling into a solid stance and rolling up the sleeves of her travel tunic.

Closing her eyes, she held both hands out to the side and began gathering power. The warm rays of Sol tenderly caressed her skin, even through her clothes. She felt them seep through till they found the matching warmth of her body, mating to give birth to beads of sweat. Turning her mind inward, she began pulling the heat from her core, transferring it to her extremities – specifically, her hands. The sweat suddenly ran cold down her back, trickling across goosebumps.

Jenna opened her eyes and found her hands glowing lightly. Or had the area around them simply darkened? Her answer came when the sun dipped behind some clouds, casting her into shadow and making the glow much more prominent. Almost casually she pointed one luminous finger to the sky, an impossibly thin line of red extending from her fingertip into the clouds.

Jenna pulled every ounce of Mars energy remaining in her body, shoving it all into the hand above her head. Glancing around, she saw Sheba had moved as far down the roof as was possible, ducking behind another chimney for cover and shielding her eyes from the light. Smiling as she glanced back up, she saw her fingertip now radiated like a newborn

star, but she found that the light did not bother her in the slightest. In fact, she found the brilliance beautiful, wavering and shimmering like a mirage.

In one last draw, she called to bear the very light around her, this time noticing a significant increase in shadow. The rooftop reminded her of the solar eclipse she once watched with Felix; everything around her was simultaneously bathed in an unnatural shadow and an alien light. Finally ready, she turned her mind to the side, finding her brother's face staring at her underneath her own eclipse. Letting out a very unladylike shriek, the floodgates of her Psynergy suddenly opened.

The roof exploded in a brand new dawn as the thin red line erupted into a furious, pulsating column of pure Mars energy, rising from Jenna's finger straight into the sky. The clouds around it instantly condensed, forming a ring of blue sky around the burning red beam. Pulses ran up the beam like a wave, in time with the minute changes in pitch of her scream.

Her mind and body melded, pouring all of herself into the Psynergy. She knew it had to throw off incredible waves of heat, but if it did, they all passed over her without notice. All Jenna knew at the moment, everything that mattered, rose from her hand. The power of volcanoes and wildfires, of combustion and conflagration. It screamed forth as she screamed forth, synchronizing the two down to the core of Alchemy itself.

Gradually her voice died out, and with it, the terrible beam. As both faded, she felt her anger leaving alongside them, until the red glow vanished entirely and she stepped off the chimney, collapsing onto her knees.

She noticed Sheba moving towards her. Placing up a hand to stop her, Jenna promptly bent over and vomited up the potato soup she had been given. The soup, now thinner, sloshed onto the rooftop and slowly dribbled down the tiles. She sat back onto the ridge, dropping her hand and feeling empty in more ways than one. "Don't worry, the rain'll clean it up," she muttered as Sheba approached.

"Are you okay?" the other girl asked, sitting down next to her and placing her arm around her.

"Fine," Jenna said sourly. "Just peachy."

Sheba frowned. "No you aren't. Was it Felix?"

Sighing, Jenna dropped her forehead into her hands, spitting a glob of vomit down onto the roof. She knew better than to use Psynergy so excessively after teleportation, but all bad decisions seemed obvious once the person was reeling from the after-effects, she supposed. "Yeah," she said finally. "I needed to vent."

"Well, you certainly got it out of your system," Sheba said, earning a weak chuckle from the other girl.

"Yeah," she said again, lifting her head back up. "He just...he makes me so angry sometimes, especially at times like this."

"He's just concerned about you." Sheba hugged her closer. "I am too."

Jenna shook her head, gesturing out across the city. "He should be concerned for the people out there! I can take care of myself, but right now, they need help!"

"And they're getting it. One person won't make much of a difference."

"They can make a difference for one person."

Sheba fell silent and Jenna felt a triumph blossom inside her, though bitterly. Sheba was her friend, and had nothing to do with Felix or his decision. She did not deserve to be on the receiving end of her anger or frustration, and that included the indirect results.

"Come on," Jenna said, standing up. "Let's go find something to do, if we have to stay inside."

Sheba followed her lead, then looked around. "I think we already ignored that order," she said, smiling.

Jenna waved a hand negligently. "I follow the spirit of the law, not the letter." She suddenly grinned. "And I don't think anyone would have appreciated me being inside for that. It was coming out either way."

Sheba rolled her eyes. "Do you feel better, at least?"

"I just used every bit of Psynergy I could gather for that. I'm exhausted, nauseous, and hungry, but I'm not angry any more." She certainly wasn't lying about that. Jenna had long ago learned the importance of being able to expel her negative emotions in the form of Psynergy, the secret to her near-endless cheer. She still harbored suspicions that Felix did the same with positive emotions, which would explain his far too serious nature.

"Wanna go raid the kitchen, then?" Sheba asked, glancing around slowly.

Jenna's grin widened. "You're scared of heights, aren't you?"

"No," the girl said, shaking her head calmly. "But every time I'm on top of a large building, something bad happens. It's a

pretty consistent thing, actually."

"Maybe the lighthouses just don't like you," Jenna said, thinking back. Something bad *had* happened on each of them.

"Not just them. Remember Tundaria, when Felix broke his ankle and Piers had to carry him down? Or at Ankhol, when that stupid tree thing almost knocked you off the top? Or-"

Jenna held her hands up in defeat. "Okay, okay, you win. Wanna race down?"

"No!"

The girl laughed, taking hold of the stone carving and holding out her other hand to Sheba. "I'm kidding. No need to shout."

Sheba snorted as Jenna helped lower her to the balcony. "I think I liked you better angry."

As soon as the younger girl had touched down, Jenna swung around and dropped behind her. "Same here." Before Sheba could respond, Jenna wrapped her arms around the other girl's head and crushed it against her chest. "You're just so cute when you're mad! I could just bake you into a little cupcake!"

Sheba struggled briefly, her voice muffled against Jenna's hand. After a few moments, though, she stopped, and Jenna felt a pair of fingers suddenly dig into her ribs. She squirmed under the tickling, wrestling to try and keep Sheba's fingers out of reach, but after repeated failures, she simply let the girl go.

Sheba pulled away immediately, her hair pointing in every direction. She grinned, looking up at Jenna, then made a pincer motion between her finger and thumb. "I know your weakness, Jenna, don't forget."

Jenna placed her hands on her hips, sticking out her tongue at Sheba, then stepped back into the room. "Whatever. Let's go."

Raising an eyebrow as she followed, Sheba said, "Where to?"

"Well, we've been to the top of the palace. Let's go to the bottom!"

Sheba's other eyebrow rose up to match the first. "To Kraden's lab? Why there?"

"Never really been there," Jenna said with a shrug. "I figure now's the best time, since there's probably no one working there. All of Kraden's alchemists don't like people coming in, and Kraden quickly brought me out when I went down there the other day to see him."

"Well," Sheba said, a mischievous smile coming over her face, "what are we waiting for, then? We can't miss this opportunity."

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Mia sank into her chair in the sanctum, exhausted. People had flooded the sanctum initially, but she quickly realized most of them were simply looking for answers. After turning them away with promises of explanations later, she had set to work on taking care of the injuries.

Megan and Justin had tended the minor injuries people had received in the falls, which were mostly limited to small cuts,

bruises, and a few concussions. Mia watched them little; she knew them to be capable of dealing with these issues, and also recognizing which ones were too advanced for them. They had learned well, with none of the bothersome pride that afflicted some youths.

She had tended to the few major injuries, as well as the many cases of frostbite. Luck had been on their side and the previous night had been a mild one for Imil. Merely the skin's surface had been affected during the night, allowing Mia to tend to them rapidly and with ease. The tub of water Garet had heated for her was now nothing more than lukewarm, but none of the cases would progress further.

Unable to focus on her work with him around, Mia had immediately sent Alex out to walk through the town and check house to house. He deferred to her immediately, only returning occasionally with people that needed assistance getting to the sanctum. They always came with frostbite, which he lacked the capabilities to treat outside. Apparently he understood Mia's dilemma, though, because he never spoke to her during his brief returns, merely sending his charges to her.

But at long last, the end of the line had come, the last patients had been sent home, and the healers had found their moment to sit down. The two children had fallen asleep on a pew, propped up against each other while they waited for instructions from Mia as she finished with her frostbit patients. She smiled as she looked at them, watching the gentle rising and falling of their chests.

As she watched, though, the image shifted. Megan turned into herself, only about seven years old, while Justin became Alex, both of them sitting in a very similar position. In her own chair sat her father, looking as weary as she felt.

"Did we do good, daddy?" her younger self asked with heavy lidded eyes.

Her father smiled, wiggling his thick, blue mustache. "You did brilliant, my little angel. You both did."

Mia felt her heart swell with pride and longing at the sudden memory of that night. It had been worse than today, much worse. Winter had settled in, and with it, disease. No Hermes' Water flowed then to stop the ravages of the simple winter flu, and a great rainstorm had been howling for three days, locking everyone inside. Few would risk leaving their homes during a winter rain. To brave the rain meant to risk hypothermia, a difficult illness to treat safely, even for Adepts. The moment it let up, her father had thrown open the doors to the sanctum, welcoming in the surge of patients.

The three of them had worked from dawn till dusk, healing and preparing medicine to stave off the sudden invasion of yet another flu. A tiring day, for sure, but a typical one in Imil's winters. At least three bouts of flu struck each year, sometimes as many as seven. Winter was a child's dream for many children, delivering them snow and ice to play with, but for Mia, winter only brought suffering and exhaustion.

Despite her initial horror at the lighting of Mercury's beacon, she believed the fountain at its base had relieved her of that terrible duty once and for all. "If not disease," she said softly, "then war. Stupid of you to have thought differently, Mia."

"It wasn't stupid."

She turned her head to the side slightly and found Alex gently closing the door to the sanctum. Her entire body tensed as she looked at him, her breath unconsciously held.

Once she realized it, she slowly let it out, forcing her body to calm down. "How's the town?"

"There were three dead," he said plainly. "Two broken necks from their falls, while the other seems to be natural causes and would have died anyway. A hunting party is missing, four people, and the pair that went up to the lighthouse for a fresh batch of the water. I've sent five of the uninjured out on the path to see if they could find them, but the hunting party will have to wait until dawn. I'm not going to send anyone into the forest on a winter night."

Mia nodded. All things considered, they were lucky. Had the others not shown up... She shook her head, not wanting to think about that. "Is that all?"

"Yes. Everything else is normal. Your friends are at the inn right now, preparing food for the sick. We should be able to get some more water tomorrow and take care of them, but until then, I've placed the more serious cases in the inn for tending." Alex reached the end of the pews and looked around. Seeing the sleeping children, he reached up and unbuckled his cloak, laying it over them like a blanket. After gently pulling Megan's hair out of her mouth and tucking it behind her ear, he turned back to the woman watching him. "Mia, I...we need to talk."

She stood up in response. "About what, Alex? So you can explain your betrayal of the Clan? No need. We discovered the truth of that on our own. What you did was for the good of the world. Understood." Mia paused as she pulled on her heavy coat, then looked at him. "So why is it I can still feel that hole in my heart, Alex? Where you stabbed with that knife of betrayal and then twisted? Can we talk about that?"

Alex stared at her for a moment, then his eyes flickered down to the floor. "I should have told you sooner."

"Sooner?" Mia stepped towards him, a feeling inside her that she had long believed dead now bubbling up. *"Sooner?"* Stopping only inches in front of him, Mia reached out and lifted his face to hers, forcing him to look into her eyes. "I trusted you, Alex! You repaid that trust with lies, however noble the cause!" Her voice had fallen to a whisper; any louder and she would have been shouting. "Would it have been so hard to explain yourself to me? Even if I didn't believe you, at least I would *know!"*

Her hand held his face in place, despite his half-hearted attempts to turn away. She knew such close confrontation made him uncomfortable, and though she believed in the futility of vengeance, she found herself wanting him to be as uncomfortable as possible. "I don't know how I can apologize to you, Mia. Nothing I say will make you forgive me."

"You're right, it won't," she said, releasing him and stepping away, facing the back wall. His admission did nothing to cool her rage. "Not even a letter?" she said, turning back around. "Am I worth so little to you that you couldn't even bother to leave a letter? Either time?"

"You know that's not true," Alex said softly, but Mia cut him off, the uncharacteristic fire inside her bursting into a fresh blaze.

"No I don't!" A rustle from beside them caught her attention, Justin wiggling slightly where he slept. She took a deep breath, calming herself a bit and lowering her voice once more. "I thought I knew you, Alex, but I was proved wrong once when you left, twice when you returned, and thrice at...at the end of it all."

Alex frowned. "I didn't-"

She waved her hand. "I don't want to hear excuses, Alex. I don't want to hear you claim you didn't think of something, or that you still care about me, or Justin, or Megan, or anyone. I've had enough of your lies, Alex. I can't hear them anymore. I just can't." She walked past him, tightening her coat. "I'll be at the inn. You're welcome to stay at the sanctum tonight."

Halfway down the pews, Alex's voice stopped her. "The Anemoi Kings mean for a genocide."

She half-considered ignoring him, but she already knew he had carefully calculated the one thing that would get her to stop. "What do you mean?" she asked as she turned back around.

"Total dominance of Weyard," he said. "They announced their intention to wipe out every Adept that did not fall under Jupiter's domain."

"Why?"

Alex shrugged. "When Alchemy was sealed, it stopped a great war that spanned across all of Weyard. That war was responsible for the taboo placed upon Alchemy for generations to come. The Anemoi left around this time, and now I expect they've returned to finish that war."

"But that's ridiculous," Mia said. "There is no war. Only in the past year have there been more Adepts than would fill Imil, and even now, most Adepts can barely control their Psynergy."

"I know," he said. "That is exactly my point. The Anemoi want to wipe out the other elements from humanity entirely,

so that their dominance will never be challenged again. Right now, the only ones they face are the rabble."

A sudden thought occurred to Mia and she suspected she knew where Alex was headed. "Right now...because in time, people will grow to challenge them."

He nodded. "They don't believe anyone right now has the power."

"...You manipulative bastard."

"I had nothing to do with this, Mia," Alex said, so sharply that the rest of her words fell back into her mouth. "I want nothing of the sort, only to see them stopped as quickly as possible."

"Well, do it, then," she said. "You're the one with the Stone of Sages, aren't you? The power to bend reality?"

Alex smiled coolly. "I am...not enough. The Anemoi knew Psynergy at the peak of its power, and they are led by the three most powerful Jupiter Adepts in the world. I need help. Weyard needs help."

"So you want us. You want us to help you."

"Do you really want to let them run unchecked?"

Mia stared at him. "This sounds entirely too familiar to another argument you might once have made. I can only wonder what waits at the end of the road for you this time." He opened his mouth to answer, but she shook her head. "I need to think about this. Goodnight, Alex."

He said nothing further as she walked out, shutting the door quietly behind her. Mia took a deep breath, looking around

her. A light snow had begun to fall, dancing around her in the moonlight. Imil had once again fallen silent, but this time, she could see the flickering glows of fires in windows.

She counted the town lucky that one of those fires had not spread out of control while everyone slept. The fire pits in all the houses were designed to prevent the spread of fire, but someone carrying the wrong item at the wrong time could have bypassed those precautions; a blanket, perhaps, or maybe a pot of grease from cooking.

A shame they weren't more similar to the Proxians, immune to the cold, or at least highly resistant. Many lives would have been spared over time, even just during her own life. She slowly picked her way through the graves outside the sanctum, her feet already taking the unmarked path to the monument at the edge of the cemetery. The snow on the ground lay undisturbed, though Mia suspected it had been that way even before the snowfall the night before. Fewer people visited the cemetery this year, and for a good reason: fewer had died.

As she walked, the gravestones became more and more worn, the result of years of wind and ice tearing at them. At least they had none of the troublesome ivy this far north. Count blessings where you can find them, she thought.

Reaching the statue, she placed a hand on it and looked up. The goddess Coatlicue gazed down at the healer gently, her arms spread in a welcome. Mia's fingers grazed the palm of one of the goddess' hands as she curtsied in respect, then softly kissed the stone and stepped past it. This area of the graveyard had been reserved for the members of the Mercury Clan, a tribute to their constant crusade against death.

Mia knew few of the people buried here, though. The decline of their clan had been evident all her life, and she had once believed it would continue to dwindle until none were left at all. The rekindling of Alchemy had banished such a belief, though; even if the bloodline of her clan were to disappear, there were still others who could take up the title in spirit. She had begun searching through Imil recently, trying to teach her healing arts to the people, many of them having discovered Mercury Psynergy in the last year. They were slow in learning, but she had been intimately familiar with patience for many years now.

Stopping at one of the headstones, she knelt down in the snow, carefully folding her cloak beneath her. She reached out and gently brushed the snow from the stone, tracing out the name of Olaf Magnarsen as she did. Once clear, her hand fell back into her lap, snowflakes landing lightly on her gloves.

"What should I do, father?" She expected no answer in words or signs. She expected no answer at all, other than what her heart could tell her. Mia knew her own bias about the situation and realized this situation had too many far-reaching consequences to let emotion cloud her judgment. Instead, she needed to let the memory of her father make the decision.

It did not take long. Once she could look at the picture with clear eyes, she knew it would be foolish to refuse Alex's help. "The enemy of my enemy might be an unreliable friend," her father had said before, "but he is a friend nonetheless."

He had been talking about a time in the woods when a bear had scared off attacking wolves, saving his hunting party,

but the phrase still applied. Whatever he was planning, she realized, it didn't matter. They had a much larger issue.

Thanking her father and laying a kiss on his grave, Mia stood back up, brushing the snow from her front. She still had no desire to see Alex, but much to see the others. She had already planned to stay at the inn tonight, at any rate.

Turning to leave, her eyes idly wandered over some of the other headstones. Harold Jensen. Eric Bernard. Marie Ambrosen.

She paused at the last one, eying it curiously. The girl had died during that same storm she had recalled earlier, but Mia still remembered her well. Would things have turned out differently if she had lived? Did she have a part to play in the present, still?

Mia resumed her walk to the inn, wondering. Something to think about, at the very least.

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"I said no, Jenna. Stay inside."

His sister pouted. She made faces. Eventually she stormed off with Sheba, leaving Felix standing alone in the hall, shaking his head. He briefly considered following her, wondering what mischief she might bring about in rebellion, then decided against it. Knowing Jenna, he would find out regardless, and stopping her would only make future attempts more sneaky.

That familiar tightness creeping into his back, he clasped his hands above his head, arms straightened, and pushed, hearing and feeling his back snap like a dead twig. Almost automatically his mouth opened in a great yawn and he

remembered just how little sleep he had actually gotten the night before. Enough to get through the day, to be sure; he needed very little for that. To keep him awake when nothing of importance was happening? Not nearly enough, he decided.

Rubbing his stomach, he realized a nap would take care of his teleportation sickness, as well. As he started walking to his room, his mind turned to their next move. It depended heavily on what news Isaac brought back from Imil, he knew, but he could not help but begin his musings.

Personally, he wanted to visit Prox next, regardless of whatever might or might not have happened in Imil. He would not feel comfortable until he verified that the Proxians were safe. They were a resilient race, to be sure, but he could not set aside the small pit of concern that had settled into the back of his mind, spreading its roots so far that no logic or reasoning would remove it.

He knew Ivan would want to visit Contigo, as well, for the same reasons. Both trips fell in line with Kraden's initial outline, so they would be reasonable steps. Did they need to stay in only two groups, though? Ivan had shown his ability to teleport without help, but Sheba had just as much skill as the boy. Felix felt confident that, possibly with some help from Ivan, she would be perfectly capable of such a feat as well.

However, he felt uncomfortable sending her out like that, given her condition. Sheba might have said that she was fine, but he knew that the girl would admit to nothing less. He needed to go with her; while he could trust someone else to check on Prox, he was much less sure about leaving Sheba's well-being in the care of anyone besides Piers, or possibly Mia. He trusted Isaac with many things, but for all

his merits, the boy was still too reckless at times. Likely Garet's influence.

Of course, there was no reason why he and Sheba could not go to Prox themselves. Yes, that sounded better. Take care of both issues together. So, then, where would the lapis be taken? Further investigations would be pointless; the lighthouses were obvious choices, but without knowing the nature of the attack, any other location was as good a guess as the next. He supposed this choice was one that would have to wait until Isaac returned.

His steps slowed as he reached the second floor, glancing down the hall. No, he realized. They still had a small loose end here. Nothing of concern for the person in question, but it would certainly be a great concern to others, once news got out about Tolbi.

Passing his own door, Felix stopped instead at Garet's room. He knocked gently on the door, then quietly opened it. Aaron sat in a chair by the window, head propped up on his arms as he looked out. He very slightly turned his head when the door opened, just enough to see who had come in, then his eyes flicked forward again to resume his silent examination.

Felix entered the room, carefully stepping around the random objects and clothes strewn about. He stopped next to Aaron and looked out the window with him. At the bottom of the hill he could see a large mass of people, crowded around the outside of the closest inn. While they were gone, Kraden had arranged for all the extra food in his kitchens to be brought around Tolbi, to help with the sudden increase of the homeless.

As he opened his mouth to speak, the roar of a dragon suddenly engulfed their senses. As Aaron's hands flew to his ears, Felix saw everything outside become tinged with red. With his hand already on his sword, he suddenly sighed, releasing it. After a few long seconds, the awful din subsided, the red glow vanishing with it. Aaron looked up at Felix, out of his chair and half-crouched. Felix simply shook his head. "It was just Jenna."

Aaron paused before looking out the window, then back to Felix. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. She's not in a good mood right now."

Shrugging, the boy settled back into his chair, resuming his prior activity. "I don't think they know that," he added, pointing out the window.

Felix looked. Many of the people at the inn had fled, with most of the remaining crouched low, pointing up at the palace. He could only imagine what they thought of such a display, regardless of how Jenna had chosen to release her anger. "Excuse me, Aaron. I need to go have a talk with my sister."

Aaron simply made a small noise in acknowledgment. Felix watched him for a moment longer, seeing if anything more would come, but when nothing did, he turned and walked out, closing the door behind him.

She had been on the roof, that much was obvious. But how? As far as Felix knew, Kraden had no access to it. Not that it would stop Jenna, he realized. After Isaac had introduced her to climbing trees when they were young, she had made it a point to scale everything in Vale that her hands could not touch the top of.

He placed a hand on the wall and closed his eyes, picturing the building. Echoes through wood and stone reminded him of the third floor balconies, but at the moment, the roof was empty. Footsteps reverberated everywhere throughout the building, but even in such a small area, Jenna's were indistinguishable.

But...Sheba was with her. And there, on the third floor, two pairs of soft footsteps walking along the hallway. Pulling his hand from the wall, he moved quickly down his own hallway, wanting to cut them off at the next set of stairs. Taking them at a run, he swung around the mid-floor landing, bounded up the remaining stairs, and stepped out onto the third floor. "Jenn- oh."

Before him stood two young servants, obviously doing their rounds of cleaning. Both looked at him confusedly as he realized his mistake. Why would Jenna and Sheba be the only two people together? "Sorry," he said, turning around and going back downstairs. He could almost feel Jenna laughing at him, though he knew she had no way of knowing about it.

His stomach gurgled at him. He placed a hand on it soothingly, remembering his plan to take a nap. After a few stairs he realized that he had never actually spoken to Aaron about his intentions. He debated whether or not to go back, eventually deciding not to. The boy had seemed fairly preoccupied already. He would simply bring it up to Garet when they got back.

As his hand touched the doorknob of his room, a voice stopped him. "Mister Brooke." Cursing mentally, Felix turned around again, finding a servant standing behind him. "I apologize, sir, but Lord Kraden has requested your presence in his office."

Felix looked back at his door, then at the ground, sighing. "Very well. No, I know the way," he said, waving away the servant. Situations like this were exactly why he always tried to sleep when the opportunity arose – things always seemed to come up to prevent it.

He had a sneaking suspicion that it had something to do with Jenna. Had he not been the cause of her anger, he likely would not have connected her to the roar. Outbursts in the form of Psynergy seldom happened with her.

Instead of finding Jenna sitting in the office with Kraden, though, he found someone completely unexpected. "Master Hama," he said calmly. "I would say this is a surprise, but you're probably the least of those right now."

"Understandable," she said, her face a mirror of Felix's. "Sudden appearances seem to be the trend since yesterday. Kraden was just telling me about our dead friend, who decided death did not suit him."

"Well, when he shows his face again, I'm going to decide life doesn't suit him, either," Felix said, sitting in the chair beside Hama. "It's good to see you're safe, though. How did you get here?"

Hama raised an eyebrow. "A boat. I'm not the Adept my brother is, yet. My focus is too divided. A good thing, apparently, otherwise I wouldn't be here."

Felix opened his mouth to ask why, but stopped when the door behind him opened. Inside walked one of Kraden's younger alchemists, each of his hands resting on Jenna and Sheba's shoulders. Jenna looked up at her brother sheepishly, while Sheba looked only at the ground, her hands wringing in front of her nervously. "I found these two

snooping around the basement, my lord. I made sure to bring them up here so that you could talk to them."

"Oh, don't be so full of yourself," Jenna said, scowling back at him. "If I really wanted to, I could have left you crying on the floor for your mommy."

The alchemist opened his mouth to respond, but Kraden cut him off with a weary wave of his hand. "Don't, Brennan. It's not worth it. Besides, though I doubt you want to hear it, she's probably right."

Brennan closed his mouth tightly, his face turning slightly red. He nodded his head to Kraden, then left, shutting the door behind him. An awkward silence settled into the room as Felix waited for Kraden to say something. By the time he realized that Kraden was likely waiting for the opposite, Jenna broke it herself. "Oh, Hama! There you are! We were looking for you."

Hama raised an eyebrow, a small smile playing across her face as Felix covered his own with a hand. "Oh? I'm sorry for misleading you, but I dislike basements."

Kraden rolled his eyes. "Alright, I'm going to cut this off before you two banter your way into the night. Jenna, Sheba, we'll talk later. Hama has brought news."

"Well," the woman said slowly, "technically, I haven't confirmed most of it. Three weeks ago, my dreams showed me the return of Anemos."

A small gasp caused everyone to turn, finding Sheba with her eyes wide and hands covering an open mouth. Felix knew the girl had long suspected her origin from the missing city, though he did not. A floating city? Even if they had

pulled their city from the ground, the sealing of Alchemy would have sent it crashing back down, eventually.

If Hama's dreams spoke the truth, though, then apparently the civilization had survived. Maybe Sheba's beliefs were true, after all. "They're...back?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Hama shook her head. "Yes, but do not take it as a blessing, Sheba. They come for war. They were the ones behind Tolbi's destruction and your lightning storm."

"War?" Felix asked. "Why?"

"I don't know," she said. "The visions only showed me events, not the reasons."

"What else did you see?" Kraden asked, frowning.

"I saw all of Imil asleep," she said. "I saw Prox unable to light fires. I saw great twisters whipping around Ankhol Tower. I saw wind and water tear at Lemuria."

Felix thought about the places affected. Tolbi. Venus Lighthouse. Imil. Prox. Ankhol. Lemuria. "Did you see anything of Tundaria?"

Hama looked at him, shaking her head. "No, but I see you made the same connection I did."

"Ancient civilizations," Kraden murmured. "Those that were around the same time as Anemos."

"They were striking high priority targets," Felix said, thinking about Prox. "The areas with the highest concentrations of strong Adepts."

The sound of the door opening made him turn around once more, but this time he found Sheba missing. He flashed Kraden a quick grimace, then followed after her, kicking himself. He had not even considered what Sheba thought about this. The Anemoi might be her family, her society, her people. What would he think if he found out Vale had suddenly attacked a city full of innocents? Or in this case, several cities? The closest experience he had, though, was finding out his town had ignorantly endangered the world with the best of intentions. A little different.

The hallway was empty by the time he reached it, so he headed for the closest stairwell. He found her huddled in the corner of the landing between the first and second floors, clutching her knees to her chest and sobbing.

He sat down next to her slowly, placing an arm around her shoulders and letting her head fall on his. "I c-can't beli-believe it," she said between sobs. "They're m-my people! I'm one of...of them!"

"You don't know that," he said as gently as possible, but the words did nothing to stem the flow of tears. He kicked himself again and tried a different tactic. "Even if you are, what difference does it make? You are you, first and foremost. Your heritage doesn't matter."

That calmed her a little, enough to reduce her to mere sniffles. "But why would they do this?"

"I don't know," Felix said, "but you can be sure that we'll stop them."

The girl sniffed again, wiping her nose with her arm, but said nothing. Felix tried to think of something more to say, but nothing came that he thought would make her feel any

better. In the end, he just stayed as he was, comforting her by simply giving her a shoulder to cry on.

Chapter 5: Diversions

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 5 – Diversions

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All around Ivan, bodies lay in the streets. He could not bring himself to look at them anymore; though none of them bore obvious injuries, every single pair of eyes looked at him, their faces twisted into expressions of despair, hurt, horror, and worst of all, disappointment. They seemed to accuse him, though he had no idea what had caused such devastation.

He did not recognize the city streets he walked, but this was not uncommon; seldom did he recognize his location in dreams, though he never realized he was dreaming until he woke. He chose his path carefully, always moving in the direction of less carnage. Somewhere, someone had to be alive. They just had to.

Yet on every street, in every broken window, in every shattered doorway, he found only the dead, watching him with their lifeless eyes. Inside he could feel the disquiet rising and giving way to terror, though the progression was slow. It had not yet billowed inside of him, leaving him unable to do much more than stutter helplessly.

If he waited, though, it would come. It always did.

Unwilling to let himself be reduced to such a state, he continued to search, even as hope continued to dwindle. Though he found less of the dead as he moved on, none of

the living were present for him to celebrate that mercy with. No sound could be heard save the echoes of his own footsteps on the stone streets, nor could he feel the slightest breath of wind on his sweat-covered cheeks

Even the sky lacked the typical black clouds that frequented these nightmares, instead replaced by the clearest of blue skies. Had he not been traversing a city of corpses, he would have enjoyed the beautiful weather, but at the moment he found it sickeningly contradicting to the butchery surrounding him. Compared to that terrible mockery, the ominous clouds seemed much less loathsome.

At long last, on the turn of a corner, Ivan found someone standing, a book in one of their hands. Relief flooded his body, banishing the growing terror instantly. He rushed towards the other person, then suddenly stopped short.

Alex turned to look at him.

Mia lay at his feet, dead.

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As Ivan looked out the window, he felt unease at the sight of black storm clouds rolling in. Though he knew they represented an ill omen only in his dreams, the sight of them in the waking world still set him on edge, wondering if the gods had sent him a sign.

He shook his head at the thoughts. None of them *needed* signs. The world lay in turmoil, instigated by the Anemoi. Even his dreams had ignored them lately, focusing instead on...other threats.

Not all of his dreams were prophetic, he knew. Normal dreams still plagued him, as he had been reminded of a few

nights ago. Sometimes, he would have difficulty trying to determine if a dream had been prophetic or not.

This had not been one of those dreams.

"We can't trust him," he had said flatly, looking at Mia. "I'm telling you, if we trust him, he's going to kill you, Mia."

"Nonsense," Alex said immediately. "You can accuse me of manipulation, betrayal, and greedy ambitions for as long as you wish, but do you honestly believe I would *ever* harm Mia physically?"

Ivan nodded. "I do now."

"He's right, Ivan," Mia said quietly before Alex could respond. "I don't fully trust his motives, but I do know he would never do that."

The boy looked pleadingly at Sheba, who simply shrugged. Isaac looked at the floor, his hand absently fingering something under his shirt. Jenna frowned, but said nothing. Garet continued to stare at Alex steadily. Felix had already left the room. He turned to Hama, positive that she would have something to add, that she had seen it too, but the woman merely met his gaze, revealing nothing in her expression.

Finally Kraden spoke. "Ivan...you've certainly been under a lot of stress these past few days. I understand seeing Alex again is a large shock, enough for you to-"

"It wasn't a normal dream, Kraden," Ivan said. "I swear on my mother's grave, this was no normal dream. The last vision I ignored resulted in this." He waved out the window. "I'm not letting it happen again."

Alex held up his hands. "If there is a possibility of Mia being harmed because of my presence, I will gladly remove myself. However, I've foreseen nothing of the sort." He looked to Sheba. "Have you?" When the girl shook her head, he turned to Hama. "Or you?"

She paused for a moment, her eyes flickering back to Ivan momentarily in what he suspected was an apology. "No, I haven't."

"And yet, you did have a vision of Tolbi's lightning storm, correct?"

"I did."

"And is Master Hama not the most renowned prophet in Angara, if not all of Weyard?" Alex asked to the room.

Kraden nodded slowly. "Her sight far surpasses that of both Ivan and Sheba, yes."

"Then I see no reason for concern," the Mercury Adept said coolly, looking back at Ivan. "I suggest you evaluate your dreams a bit more carefully, so you can stop accusing me of ridiculous crimes."

He had left the room in a fury, his eyes burning at the unfairness of the situation. Even now, after he had calmed down, the memory still blew at the embers inside him, threatening to flare up his anger once again.

A soft knock came on his door, but he ignored it, instead laying down on his bed and planting his face into his pillow. After a few seconds, the door opened anyway and someone stepped in, gently shutting the door. For a wild moment, Ivan wondered if it was Alex, come to silence his accusations in a more permanent way. The man had the same light step

as whoever had entered, but he realized if he was to be killed, his murderer would not have knocked first.

He felt his mattress sink slightly as the person sat down beside him. "You shouldn't sleep in your clothes," Sheba's voice gently admonished. "It wears them out faster."

"Wouldn't want that." The words came out muffled and he could now taste the pillow's fabric in his mouth. Sighing, he pushed himself up and sat against the headboard, pulling his knees up. "Sorry. I'm just..."

She shook her head. "You don't need to explain, Ivan. I know this isn't easy."

He fell silent, feeling the terrible pressure of helplessness pressing on his chest once more. "You...you do believe me, don't you?" His voice cracked as the question came out in little more than a whisper, but the usual feelings of weakness and shame that followed paled in comparison to his fear and concern.

"Of course I do," Sheba said immediately. "And so do the others."

"Mia doesn't."

"Mia doesn't know what to believe. She's confused." Sheba paused, chewing at her lip. "Try looking at it from her point of view. You're telling her that someone she has known since she was a child is going to kill her. She's going to have a hard time believing that, even from someone she trusts."

Ivan picked his head up from his knees, spreading his arms in confusion. "But he's betrayed her already!"

"But not maliciously," Sheba said quietly. "Not with the intent of hurting her."

Ivan could not think of a response. Slowly he calmed down, his anger fading. Sheba was right, after all; he had never tried to harm Mia. Or any of them, come to think of it. Even Jenna had mentioned once that he avoided hurting people, where possible.

He suddenly looked at Sheba sharply, feeling the slightest of grazes across his mind, little more than a single strand of a single feather brushing the surface. "Stop that."

She blushed, looking down, and he felt the touch vanish. "Sorry. I thought it might be good to calm you down a bit."

"I don't want to be calm," he said irritably. "I want people to listen."

Sheba stared at him flatly, and this time he felt his anger fading of his own accord. He *was* being a bit childish about this whole thing, he realized. Throwing fits and being angry would not make Mia listen any more than she had already. "I'm sorry again. I'm being stupid."

"You're being concerned," she said, "and you're right to be, but you don't need to be so knee-jerk about it."

"I know, I'm sor-"

"And stop apologizing about it. Just cut it out."

Ivan sighed, shaking his head. "It's just...I know what I saw. I don't know why it happens, but it will, and I'll... I'll do anything to stop it."

Sheba looked over at him sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

He looked away, immediately regretting the words. "I... nothing."

Her hands shot out, slamming into his shoulders and pinning him to the headboard, her face grim. "I swear to Procne, Ivan, if you don't tell me, I *will* read your mind." Even as he shielded his thoughts in defense, masking them with an onslaught of random words and images, he felt her push harder. "And I'm far better at it than you. I will find out, one way or the other, so tell me now."

Another knock came to the door, loud and rapid. Both Jupiter Adepts immediately looked toward the door as it suddenly opened and Garet stepped in. "Hey, Ivan, I... Oh." He stopped suddenly, looking between the two as they stared back at him. "Uh...never mind, it's not important." He backed out slowly, not taking his eyes from them until the door closed once more.

A few seconds of awkward silence hung in the air between them before Sheba returned her fierce gaze to Ivan. "Well?"

The boy sighed and looked down, unable to meet her eyes. "You already know exactly what I want to do, Sheba. You wouldn't have done this, otherwise."

"I want to hear you say it."

His arms tingling from the pressure, he took a deep breath. "I want to kill Alex."

A sharp crack resounded across the room as his face exploded in pain, courtesy of Sheba's hand. When the bright burst of light cleared from his vision, he found her with her

open palm still extended to the side, where it had remained after passing across his face. Fear now blended in with the fury in her expression, which confused him. Why would she be afraid? "How can you even think about such a thing, Ivan?" she asked.

He did not answer at first, feeling the blood rushing to the hand print he knew would be visible on his face. "You've never experienced it," he said at last, softly. "You grew up around people that found your powers wondrous and amazing. I grew up around people that feared them and hated me for it. All my life, I've been called a...a freak or a weirdo. Do you know how many times I've wanted nothing more than to snap, to attack someone over and over again until they stopped talking? Stopped moving?"

Shaking his head as Sheba released him and sat back, Ivan said, "If I've found one thing that makes me angrier than that, it's watching someone I care about get hurt and not being able to help. You're my only friends. I... I don't know how to deal with something like this."

As he felt a portion of the pressure lift from his chest, he realized that it felt good to tell Sheba these things, things that he normally kept hidden deep inside for fear that, one day, he might actually find them reasonable. He looked up, opening his mouth to mention this, but his words were automatically replaced by others. "Sheba? What's wrong?"

The girl had stood up, crossing her arms across her chest as she backed away from Ivan, eventually standing with her back to the wall. Her head still shook side to side gently as she looked at him, eyes wide with fright. "No..." she mouthed, the word inaudible save for the slight exhale that accompanied it.

His own troubles forgotten instantly, he jumped from the bed and moved to her, but stopped as she retreated further, backing into a corner. Slowly he sat back down on the edge of the bed, placing his hands in his lap, looking down once more. "Sheba...I'm not a monster."

"Aren't you?" she said. "Aren't we all? Is this just our nature?"

Ivan looked back up at her, confused this time. "What do you mean?"

"Our people. The Anemoi." She gestured vaguely out the window. "They seem to have no problem killing hundreds of people. Now you tell me that you've thought about the same thing. Is it in our blood? Are we destined to wrestle with ourselves until we give in and become butchers?"

He frowned. Having been so focused on what he had seen, he had completely neglected to think about how the situation affected not only Mia, but all the others – especially Sheba. While he might be descended from the Anemoi, the Contigoans were far removed from their ancestors. But Sheba...in Sheba's veins ran the blood of a pure Anemian. Hers were the people responsible for Tolbi's devastation, for Imil's near-miss. The people she had spent so long searching for.

Moments like this reminded him of how young she was; of how young they all were. Conflicts like this were not meant for children, but adults who had seen enough of the world to remain steadfast in times of emotional trouble. Ivan felt he made a good run for it, but even he succumbed to his own problems. Hama was much better suited for this sort of thing, given the experience she had with life. Piers, too, who had probably seen more years than all of them combined,

even if they were sheltered. Felix and Mia...they had probably both seen enough to pull through.

But the rest of them? They had no business with this, like they had no business with the lighthouses. Circumstances, though, had denied them the opportunity to avoid such conflicts. If they refused to fight, no one could rise to fill their roles properly. Others might be better suited, or more courageous, but for good or ill, they held the power. Theirs would be the hands to resolve this.

No matter what the personal cost.

"No," he said finally. "We're different from them. Everyone thinks bad thoughts at times, Sheba, especially when we're angry or hurt. We can't help that. But a person shouldn't be judged on his thoughts alone. That's the difference between us and them: they act on their cruel thoughts. We have the strength to resist our temptations and do what's right."

She looked up at him, still holding herself tight. "But Alex... You said you wanted to kill him."

Ivan paused, then nodded. "I did. I still do. But I won't. We need him, whether I like it or not, so I'll just need to do everything I can to make sure my vision doesn't come to pass."

Sheba nodded in return, slowly returning to the bed and sitting next to Ivan. "I think it's my turn to apologize. This whole thing has really spun me around." Sighing, she tilted her head back to look at the ceiling. "It's just... All my life I've wanted to know where I came from, the place that might have been my home. I've wanted to meet my real parents, just to know who they are."

"You never expected it to be like this," Ivan said gently.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I dreamed of Anemos returning a lot, so much that I hoped it was a vision. They would return, bringing with them the secrets of the ancient civilizations, revealing the mysteries of Psynergy. They would help bring an era of peace. Not...this."

"You couldn't have expected this, Sheba."

"No, but I've still been a little stupid about it."

Ivan smiled. "Well, that makes two of us, then. I've been wallowing in self pity when I could be doing something useful. Or at least not being so much of a downer."

Sheba bumped her shoulder into him playfully. "Yeah, you always have been our resident source of negativity. Not even Sour Face Felix can dampen cheer as effectively as Ivan the Pessimist."

He looked over at her cautiously. "In all seriousness, though, are you going to be alright? I know you're not taking this well, but..."

The question hung in the air for a few long seconds before she answered. "I'll be fine. I'm just... I was worried about myself, especially after what you said...but I've been overreacting about this. Felix said it best: I am me, not my heritage."

"And he's right," Ivan said, nodding. "You're nothing like them. In fact, if I was blind, I'd call you Laliveran without hesitation."

She raised an eyebrow. "Why? I don't act anything like most of them."

"The accent," he said simply. "If you ever need to talk about anything, though, you know I'll be around. In the meantime, we should probably go find out what story Garet is spreading. He *did* catch us in a very, uh, awkward position, and the gods only know what he started thinking."

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Mia sat on her bed, wringing her hands. She wanted to sleep so badly and ease both her remaining fatigue and teleportation sickness, but she simply could not find it. Ivan's words still lingered in her head, a stalker that hung in the shadows, always just barely visible. The accusations against Alex did not necessarily bother her; after all, with how little she herself trusted him, why would anyone else?

No, Ivan's absolute certainty bothered her. She had known the boy almost as long as Isaac and Garet, and she knew Ivan avoided confrontations wherever possible. They made him uncomfortable, and though he had certainly improved in his assertiveness, the outburst against Alex still struck her as rather uncharacteristic of him. The only thing that would have driven him to that would be if he had completely believed that Alex's staying would bring her harm.

The snide voice in her head did little to help her mood. How is it, it asked, that you trust the traitor and doubt the friend? Pangs of guilt wracked her mind whenever the thought surfaced, feelings of betrayal and hypocrisy accompanying them. How must Ivan feel, then, when he realized the same thing?

Mia stood up, abandoning her plans for a nap, and walked to the window. The late morning sun hung in the east, lighting up the city for another long day of work. The others had told her what happened to Tolbi, but not until she arrived did the

destruction hit her fully. True, much of the town was still intact; the bolts had been sporadic, obliterating what they struck, but leaving the surrounding areas untouched. The absolute destruction of those areas still surprised her, though.

She could see some of the black sores from the window, small trails of smoke still rising from a few. Some people, little more than ants at this distance, stood around them, but most avoided them entirely. Better at the moment to focus on what remained than what had been lost, she supposed. Or maybe people just wanted to avoid thinking about them, hoping that by ignoring them, the terrible storm would not return.

That was a sentiment she could agree with. A distraction would be good right now, something to take her mind off the concerns that plagued her. Her eyes settled on a flock of people around an inn near the bottom of the hill. While she had neglected to bring any of Hermes' Water with her, she doubted disease was the primary concern, at any rate. She could at least provide some service as a healer.

Pulling on a light set of robes and her boots, she left her room, trying to decide where Felix would be. Kraden had retired to his own chambers for a nap as well, though for different reasons than she, leaving Felix's primary confidant unlikely. His other was still sailing the seas, hopefully unaffected by the great hurricane Hama had seen, which left Felix with...who, exactly?

Hama, probably. Though Mia had only met the woman twice before today, the impression she had given led the healer to think that she and Felix would get along well. But where would they be? Mia tapped her lips thoughtfully, then set out for Kraden's study. Felix probably wanted to dodge the

members of their little group who would avoid the study on principle.

When she opened the door quietly, she found her assumptions correct: both Felix and Hama sat inside, quietly speaking. Felix's face held a serious expression, but that mattered little; she had learned quickly that it usually did. "Good morning once again, Mia," Hama said as she entered. "Your nap seems to have been very quick."

"It didn't happen," she said, closing the door behind her. "There's...too much on my mind."

"That's unfortunate. Would you like some help in sleeping?"

Mia shook her head. "No, thank you. I had something else in mind, actually." She turned to Felix, who said nothing, waiting silently. "I'd like to head to the bottom of the hill to help at the inn. They're taking in refugees, and I'm sure they could use some help, at least for a while."

Felix frowned, making Mia fight down a smile at how quickly he had settled back into his role, assuming he had ever let it lapse. "I don't like the idea of leaving. We don't know if the Anemoi will attack again, and I don't want to spend more time looking for people if they do."

She opened her mouth to find out just how set in that decision he was when Hama spoke up instead. "I've seen no more attacks like the last. I believe they simply used Jupiter Lighthouse in passing to make use of the opportunity before landing. Without proper damage assessments of the areas they struck, more attacks would be useless."

The frown lessened, but still remained. "I don't know. The city isn't entirely safe, and there's a storm coming. I know

you're capable of handling yourself, Mia, but I don't like pressing my luck."

"I can go with her," Hama said. "I wouldn't think anyone in this city poses a threat to the both of us."

"I won't push myself, either," Mia added. "I just... I need something to do right now. Something to keep myself busy."

Felix looked at her for a few more moments, thinking it over, then nodded. "Alright. Be careful, though. We plan on leaving in about...three hours."

"We'll be back," Hama said, standing up. "We can pick this up some other time, Felix. It's nice having someone new to discuss with."

"It's nice having someone at all," Felix said, a small smile making its way onto his face. "There's a distinct lack at home."

Mia turned back to the door and walked out, Hama following. "What were you talking about?" she asked.

"Philosophy, mostly," Hama said. "I enjoy seeing what views others have about the world. It helps me evaluate my own."

"Searching for enlightenment?"

Hama shook her head. "I don't think such a true state exists. I believe there's always more to learn about oneself, others, and the world. My master disagrees with me on that, so we always enjoy a good discussion on the topic when I visit."

"Your master?" Mia looked sideways at the woman. "I thought you were a master."

"A good monk never stops being a student or a teacher," she said. "There is always more to learn, and always someone to teach. My master will be my master forever."

"Who is he?" Mia asked. "Your master, I mean."

Hama smiled, glancing sideways with only her eyes. "You've met him, Mia. In fact, I believe he taught you something about Psynergy. Or, as it is known to the monks, Ki."

Mia's eyebrows rose as they walked outside. "Master Nyunpa! How is he doing? He didn't look well last time we saw him."

Frowning, Hama said, "No, he didn't. He searches for enlightenment by trying to rid himself of all physical needs. He'll be gone within a year if he keeps this up."

Mia only nodded in response. The man had been fasting when they left, already little more than a skeleton. His Psynergy could help sustain him, for a time, but she suspected Hama's prediction would hold true. "So he taught you Psynergy?" she asked after a short while.

"Some," Hama said. "I learned basic control on my own in Contigo, but he taught me many ways Jupiter Psynergy can be used in regards to the mind. I also learned Chi from him."

"What exactly *is* Chi? Master Feh told us it was energy of the body, but I've never really understood it."

Hama exhaled through her nose softly, not answering for a moment. Mia kept quiet, patiently waiting for Hama to organize her thoughts. "It's...difficult to describe. Imagine describing how Psynergy works to a non-Adept. Describing Chi to one who has not felt its effects is difficult. What Feh said was correct: Chi is the energy of the physical world, as

Psynergy is the energy of the mental. Like Psynergy, though, its effects are immeasurable."

"So, it's not just used for combat?"

"No," Hama said, shaking her head, "though the applications are very useful for it. For example, by reaching out and sensing others' Chi, I don't need my eyes to read an opponent's movements."

"Similar to..." Mia paused, thinking. "Wait. You can read anyone?"

The woman smiled again. "Unlike reading the Psynergy signature of an Adept using Psynergy, everyone is using Chi. They simply don't realize it, so their Chi is unfocused."

"That's right," Mia said slowly. "I remember Feh mentioning that anyone could use it. What other things can you do with Chi?"

"Well, I know a much more practical use, and one you would find useful, but I think you might prefer a demonstration instead."

Mia looked at her questioningly. The woman gestured ahead and Mia realized that they had reached the inn without her even realizing it. Her surprise must have shown in her face, because another small smile came over Hama's face. Hama motioned for her to lead, so Mia picked her way through the dense crowd, pardoning herself frequently. It took a few sudden movements to avoid being knocked over by people who could not see her, but eventually she reached the door and pulled it open.

The inside held few standing people. Most lay on tables or benches, though some had been relocated to the floor for

space. Mia quickly understood that the inn had been converted into an infirmary. Many of the people here slept, but a few lay awake, looking at her. One let out a soft moan that ended more like a grunt, an attempt to cut the sign of weakness off.

"Please, sir, if you're not injured, I need to ask you to wait outside."

Mia looked up to find a middle-aged woman talking to a green-haired man, wiping her hands off with a bloodied towel. "Of course, I'm sorry," he said softly. "I didn't mean to get in your way."

As he turned and walked past the two, the woman looked at them next. Before she could say anything, though, Mia said quickly, "My name is Mia. I'm a healer, from Imil. I came to see what I could do for the people here before I leave the town."

The woman's eyes widened slightly. "Imil? We haven't seen one of your healers around here for years. I'm Lina, and I'd welcome your help, if you can give it. The only healer we have is a bit overrun. I've been helping where I can, but I don't know enough to take over for him." Her eyes drifted over to Hama. "You don't look like you're from Imil, though."

"I am Master Hama of Lama Temple," she said, bowing briefly. "I'm here to assist Miss Mia."

The suspicion cleared from the woman's face immediately. "Oh! Master Hama! I'm sorry, I just... I'd heard you were in Atteka."

Hama nodded. "I just returned. Do you mind if we look at the injured?"

Shaking her head, the woman said, "No, of course not. The ones upstairs have all been tended to, so they just need time to recover. We've run out of space in the rooms, though, so new people have been coming in here. If you need me or have any questions, I'll be making my runs through the rooms."

"Thank you," Mia said, watching as the woman moved to the stairs, then turned back to Hama, rolling up her sleeves. "All right. Are you ready?"

Hama glanced around briefly at the tables, looking thoughtful. When she turned back to Mia, she said, "None of them seem to be in a critical condition, so I'd like to try and teach you some useful Chi techniques, if you'd be willing to learn."

"Of course I would be, but I don't know how to use it."

"That will make it a bit more difficult, but not impossible," Hama said, then waved her over. "Come. We can start here. Watch first."

Closing her eyes, Hama turned toward the unconscious person and placed a hand over their foot, hovering it mere inches above. She slowly moved her hand up the body, pausing briefly at times. Mia glanced up at her face to find an expression of utter calmness on it. Looking back at the moving hand, she tried to sense the energies that Hama had spoken of, but not knowing what to look for, she found nothing.

After passing the head, Hama pulled her hand back and turned to Mia. "There is internal bleeding beneath three broken ribs. He also has a minor sprain in his left ankle." Instead of returning to the patient, though, she walked over

to the stairwell. "Lina," she called up. "Do you have any ink and paper?"

"At the desk," the innkeeper's voice came down. "Take some paper from the back of the ledger."

"Thank you." Hama followed her instructions and returned to Mia with a freshly dipped quill and a sheet of paper. "A standard healer will be able to deal with these injuries, so I'd like to simply leave a note as to what they are and move on. If we have time, we can come back and deal with him."

Mia nodded in agreement. Certain injuries, though normally difficult, became much easier with Psynergy. Those were always her priority, second only to life-threatening ones. After Hama had jotted down her note, Mia asked, "How could you tell that? I mean, I know it was Chi, but how did you use it?"

Hama walked to the next patient. "One useful technique is the ability to look at another's Chi flow and find internal injuries."

"Chi is affected by that?"

Nodding, Hama said, "Chi is affected by everything in the body. This is why many martial artists condition their body to be resistant to injury. In addition to the obvious benefits, it helps maintain their Chi flow undisturbed. Some things, such as a fractured rib, won't affect the flow much, due to it being a minor injury in the center mass, where the majority of Chi flows through. However, internal bleeding or a broken bone in an extremity can severely hamper Chi flow to the area, throwing off one's balance. You've fought; you know how important balance is."

Mia nodded, then smiled against her will. After a raised eyebrow from Hama, she shook her head. "I just thought of when I first met Ivan. He hadn't quite learned to balance with his sword yet. He, um, fell a lot in their sparring matches."

"Really?" Hama asked thoughtfully. "He seemed to handle himself fairly well when we met at Lama Temple."

"He's come a long way," Mia said. "Apparently, when he first met Isaac and Garet, the only way he knew how to fight was with wind. Garet still makes fun of him sometimes for it."

Mia could sense Hama hesitate before she spoke again. "How does he fit in with you all? Whenever I've talked to him, he seems very...reserved."

Nodding, Mia said, "He's very reclusive with people he doesn't really know, but he's fine with all of us."

Hama sighed. "That's good. I've worried that he had difficulties connecting with people. I was...afraid he might not have friends."

"Oh, no! All of us are friends to him," Mia quickly assured her. "And he's a very good friend to all of us, too. Isaac and Garet are like brothers to him." She paused thoughtfully. "Jenna might be a bad influence, though she does mean well."

Hesitation again. "Is he...a reliable friend?"

Mia immediately understood the true meaning behind the question and lowered her head, smiling weakly. "And here I thought by coming out here I could avoid this."

"I apologize, Mia. If you don't want to talk about it, then we-"

Shaking her head, Mia cut her off with a wave of her hand. "No, it's probably not good for me to avoid things like this." Breathing out slowly and collecting her thoughts, she said, "Ivan is one of the most reliable people I know. I've counted on him so many times, and he's always done his very best to help and protect us all. This..." She wiggled her fingers briefly, searching for the words. "This is confusing. He really believes what he sees is real, but I know it can't be possible. I might not trust Alex, but I know he would never hurt me."

"I can talk to him," Hama said after a few seconds. "It's possible that he simply misinterpreted his dream. I still misread symbols at times. Visions are not always clear, nor are they necessarily true. The outcomes they show can be changed."

"I hope so," Mia said quietly. "I feel terrible about this whole thing."

Hama clapped her hands together, startling the healer slightly. "Well, then I'll need to give you something to occupy your mind. Come here, and I'll teach you how to read Chi. We've only a couple hours, so let's make the most of them."

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"I don't want to talk to you."

Garet sighed, laying his forehead on the door. "Aaron, come on. Unlock the door."

"No."

Growling slightly, Garet pounded his fist against the wood again. "Do you want me to break it down?"

"You won't."

"I will," he said, pulling his hand back in preparation as he eyed the door. He wouldn't even need Psynergy for this.

"Kraden would get mad at you."

He paused, then dropped his hand. His brother was certainly right about that. Kraden tended to disapprove of anytime Garet used excessive force, and he suspected that would only apply twice as much in the man's own house. "Then I'll climb in through the window."

"You won't climb up here. You don't like climbing on anything."

Garet cursed under his breath. That one *had* been a bluff. "Are you just going to stay in there all day?"

"Unless you take me with you, yes."

Throwing his hands up in frustration, despite the fact that he shared the hallway with no one else, Garet shouted, "Fine! Then stay there!"

Turning around, Garet stormed back down the hallway, fuming all the while. Why was Aaron being so difficult? He had nearly died once already, when Tolbi had been attacked. Why was he so eager to place himself in harm's way? As much as it bothered Garet to think it, Aaron really couldn't help with anything. His spirit and determination had nothing to do with it, that much was certain; he was simply too young.

Garet blinked suddenly, finding himself outside. He thought back to his path, but could not remember actually making a conscious decision to leave the palace. Shrugging it off, he

decided to walk around it and see what he could find, but the moment he turned to his left, he found Felix instead.

The other man knelt on the ground, his hands meticulously searching through the thick flower garden along the front of the building. He looked up briefly as Garet approached, then returned to his work. Garet waited for a few moments, wondering if Felix would explain, but when he held his silence, Garet decided to break it. "What're you doing?"

"Weeding the garden." Garet watched as Felix gently separated two flowers, took hold of a short, green plant between them, then pulled up on it carefully, removing it all the way down through the roots. Once free of the earth, he tossed the weed aside negligently and moved on, continuing to scour the flowerbed.

"Couldn't you do that with Psynergy?" Garet asked.

"Probably," Felix said, tugging free another weed with a soft ripping sound.

Garet waited a few seconds, but Felix said nothing further. "Why don't you, then?"

Rip. "Two reasons. One, I don't have anywhere near the level of control that Isaac has over plants. I might pull up flowers with the weeds, and that defeats the purpose. Two, I like the work of weeding. It's rewarding." Pulling another out, Felix suddenly stood up, brushing off his hands and turning to Garet. "Now, why don't you just tell me what's on your mind?"

Garet stared at him. "What makes you think something's on my mind?"

"Because you're trying to make conversation with me," Felix said, one eyebrow arching slightly.

The Mars Adept thought about that for a moment. To his knowledge, he had never actually talked to Felix about anything insignificant, not alone. Any time that the two of them talked, it concerned something that needed to be done. He could not remember a time the two of them simply talked about nothing. "It's Aaron. He's angry at me because I didn't let him come to Imil yesterday."

Felix shook his head. "You've got quite the record at this, don't you? First Kay, now Aaron."

"You're not really one to talk," Garet shot back.

"No, but at least I know *why* Jenna is angry with me." Felix frowned. "Look, Garet, I'm not trying to argue with you right now. It's obvious that you're confused about this and don't know how to deal with it."

Garet paused, then shook his head. "You're right, I don't. I'm not good at things like this. Would you be able to talk to him?"

"No," Felix said, then pointed at Garet. "That's what got you in this mess with Kay. It doesn't matter if you're good at it or not, Garet, you need to be the one to do it. Someone else talking to him will only make him angrier at you, even if they can explain your reasoning better."

He fell silent for a few moments, looking in another direction and thinking back again. Felix was right; he had not spoken to Kay since their fight several months ago, but he *had* tried getting Isaac to talk to her for him. The details had faded a bit from his memory, but he felt fairly certain she had not started ignoring him completely until after that.

Even if *he* had to talk to Aaron, though, that still left him a problem. "I don't know what to tell him, though, or how to say it. He won't even open the door for me."

"You could just talk through the door," Felix said. "They're not much more than wood."

Garet shook his head again. "I can't stand talking to someone I can't see."

Felix shrugged. "I've given all the advice I can, Garet. This isn't exactly my forte, either. Just...don't lie to him. You're always brutally honest, so use that to your advantage here and let him know it all."

Garet nodded slowly. "Alright." He turned to leave, then stopped and turned back slightly. "And...uh, thanks, Felix."

The other man nodded in return, then knelt back down at the garden, resuming his work. Before Garet could leave, though, he asked suddenly, "What do you want to do with him? I mean, where do you want him to stay, for now?"

He paused again, thinking about it for only a moment. "Back home. Our family's there, and it's a fairly small town. He'd be safe."

Felix nodded once more. "I thought the same. You should tell him that."

Garet left him there, walking back inside. Felix's advice made sense, but he still needed to get around his other problem. If no one could do the talking itself for him, maybe he could at least go to someone else first and get their thoughts. Talking it through with someone might help him figure out what to say.

Who, though? The answer came immediately to him, accompanied by a mental 'duh'. Ivan knew how to appease people better than anyone else, especially with all his training as a merchant. Garet also knew he would not find the conversation with Ivan uncomfortable, which would be a pleasant change from the one he had just left. If anything, Ivan was usually the uncomfortable one in their conversations.

Reaching the boy's door, his hand snapped out as he approached, knocking quickly. Without waiting for a response, he opened the door and stepped inside. "Hey, Ivan, I... Oh." His question trailed off as he noticed that Ivan seemed to be occupied. The boy had squeezed himself tightly against the backboard of his bed, Sheba inches away from his face with her arms on his shoulders.

Both stared back at him, Ivan looking uneasy, Sheba looking furious. Oh. "Uh...never mind, it's not important." He reached behind him for the door that had drifted partially shut and pulled it back open, not willing to take his eyes off Sheba; her eyes looked feral. Once his feet had cleared the door frame, he slammed the door shut again, exhaling slowly.

After a moment, he began to walk away, chuckling softly to himself. Good of Sheba, he supposed. Ivan certainly would not have initiated anything between them. Hell, he looked ready to curl up into a ball and vanish as it was. Sheba must have come on pretty strong. He imagined Jenna would explode upon hearing this news, the face his mind gave her making him laugh harder.

He almost headed to her room, then remembered that he had something else to do. Stopping somberly outside of his own, he raised his hand to knock on the door. He paused

before dropping it, though, then gently placed his head against the wood instead, his hand falling back to his side.

What could he say? Nothing came to mind that would make Aaron open the door. He had tried earlier, but no new ideas had surfaced. Talking to him through the door would only get himself frustrated, and likely not change a thing. How could he get in?

The answer made him groan softly. He already knew exactly how to get into the room, but he hated the idea. This wasn't for him, though, he realized. This was for Aaron. Steeling himself, he walked to the empty room next door.

Though sparse on the third floor, the second floor held a respectable number of viewing balconies, spaced to include every other room. Garet's room had lacked one, but his window was flanked by two. Onto one of these balconies Garet stepped, turning towards his own window and eying the wall critically.

He could make it, he supposed. The grooves in the wall would allow him to shimmy over to his own window, which he would have to count on Aaron to open for him. Stepping to the railing, he glanced down, finding the distance to the ground short enough to survive without significant injury, provided he fell right.

The reasoning did little to calm his nerves, though. He had always found it ironic that heights had never bothered him until after Jupiter Lighthouse; he figured after dangling from such a great height, lesser ones would seem insignificant by comparison. That seemed to be how Sheba felt, at least.

Looking up, he realized he would have to do it quickly, though. Soon enough it would be raining, and a maneuver like this would be impossible with wet stone. Taking a deep

breath, he wiped his hands on his pants, wishing he had grabbed some dirt while he had been with Felix, then placed both hands on the railing.

Getting onto the other side was simple enough, but once he found himself on the outside of the balcony, nothing but air between him and the other balcony two rooms down, he found himself reluctant to remove either hand from the rails. The fear did not incapacitate him, as he had seen fear do to others, but it did make him unwilling to advance further.

...How different this was when no adrenaline coursed through his veins. Had Aaron been trapped in the room by a fire, or some such emergency, Garet would not have even blinked at such an obstacle. Yet now, with no danger present save for the possible loss of his brother's trust, it brought him to a halt, at least temporarily.

Because temporarily was all that he would let it stop him for. No urgency beat at his senses, but necessity still hammered away its dull rhythm, reminding him that he had no alternatives available, or at least none he could think of. He would do this, and if he had to do it while suffering from the fear he normally bypassed without a second thought, then he would crush his fears back down and do it anyway.

Reaching out, Garet slipped his fingers into the indention, barely deep enough to fit up to his second knuckle, then stepped off the balcony with one foot. He paused for a moment, taking a deep breath, then moved his remaining hand and foot. The moment he did, his fingers instantly began to burn in strain, trying to support the majority of his weight. He bent his knees and braced his feet against the wall, removing some of the stress from his fingertips, and began to slowly move across.

What had seemed like mere feet became closer to miles as he moved. With such little space to actually hold on to, he could only shuffle his fingers along in small increments, each movement covering barely more than an inch. The burning in his fingers began to spread to his lower arms as they stretched out, supporting him.

He wiggled his feet around briefly, searching for the groove below him. Once his boots found it, he tried fitting his toes inside. Had they fit, it would have given him much better leverage, but unfortunately, the groove was slightly too large. Abandoning his ideas for a foothold, he continued his trek across the wall, feeling that the great window had not moved any closer.

He imagined what someone would say if they saw him like this, creeping along the building to a window. The guards would be called, he imagined. Felix would probably yell at him, and this time, he really had no legitimate reason to endanger himself – not one for others, at least. To him, needing to talk to Aaron was all the reason he needed.

At a gust of wind, a rattling above caused Garet to look up. Above his hand was the edge of the window, ready for grabbing. Unfortunately, he could not remember by how large of a margin the glass panes themselves cleared the wooden frame when it opened. Trying to hang onto the edge itself might result in nothing more than Aaron smashing his hands with the window.

He paused there momentarily, thinking about how to signal Aaron. Quickly deciding Psynergy would be easiest, he fixed his grip slightly, then forced a flame into existence above his head. He danced it around briefly, flaring and dimming it as he did, then snuffed it when he heard the window open.

"Aaron?" he called out hesitantly, suddenly worrying that he had picked the wrong room.

A small, red-haired head poked out and looked down. "Garet!"

The Mars Adept wasted no time in reaching out to grab the window's edge, making use of his much improved grip to get his second hand there a moment later. Now able to get horizontal leverage, he quickly pulled himself up, grabbing at other available handholds until he could get a knee into the window and swing himself into the room.

His brother stood back with his mouth hanging open slightly, causing Garet to smile. "Surprised to see me?"

Catching himself, Aaron turned away, crossing his arms. "I just didn't think you'd actually do it."

Garet realized he still had no idea what to say. Instead, Felix's advice came to mind: don't lie to him. "I did it because I needed to talk to you." He shut the window, grabbed the nearby chair, and sat down in it, still facing Aaron as he flexed his fingers repeatedly, trying to work out the lingering burn. "I'm not going to tell you that you shouldn't be mad at me. I'd like it if you weren't, but if you are, that's fine. I'm not doing any of this to make you happy, I'm doing it to keep you safe."

"That's what dad always told you, but you're still fine," the boy said, still facing the door.

"Because I was ready when I left," Garet said. "Or at least ready enough to start learning the rest on my own. And I had help, too."

Aaron spun back around, throwing his fists down at his sides. "But you would have been with me! You were there to protect me if I couldn't do it myself! Isn't stuff like this why you've been training me?"

"No," Garet said, shaking his head and surprising himself with the answer that came out. "I've been training you so that you *didn't* leave. So long as I was training you, I figured you wouldn't want to leave home."

"That doesn't make any sense," Aaron said, some of the anger leaving his posture. "I've always wanted to go on an adventure like you. You know that."

Garet nodded. "I did. I do. I wanted to stall it for as long as I could, until I was sure that you could handle *anything* you came across. Do you know how many times I almost died last year?"

Aaron slowly shook his head. "But...all your stories... Were they fake?"

"No," Garet said, sighing. "They were all real, but those aren't *all* the things we did. There were plenty of times that stray monsters could have killed me, if I had been alone. Stories where the only reason I survived was because Isaac had been paying attention, or Ivan had fast reflexes, aren't very interesting for me to tell. I lived through luck, not because of something cool I did. It happened just as much to the others."

His anger forgotten now, Aaron climbed onto his bed and pulled his legs underneath him. "Like when?"

Garet paused for a moment, thinking. "Like... Like the Kraken story. Yeah, I made a good show of cutting off a few tentacles, and Ivan eventually fried it with his Psynergy, but

he also got hit in the fight. He spent the next few days unconscious from the Kraken's poison. The only reason he's still alive is because Mia is such a good healer. If she hadn't been there, he'd have died.

"My point is, we survived a lot of things we probably shouldn't have through dumb luck. We weren't ready for what we did, and neither are you. I don't want to risk your safety and just hope everything goes right for you. I want to know you can handle everything you might see, especially now."

Aaron looked down at his knees for a while, wiggling his toes behind him. "Why couldn't I have come with you to Imil, though? You would have been there."

"I didn't know what we would find. What if the town had been overrun by monsters? What if the person we thought was responsible had been there? We figured anyone who could do this to Tolbi would be far more powerful than us. How would I have protected you? You saw how well the others could protect Isaac against Alex. What if that had been you, instead?"

"I guess," Aaron said, fidgeting slightly. "It's just...I want to go places, Garet. You got to see so much of the world, and all I know about them are from your stories. I want to see them for myself."

Garet stood up and walked to the bed, pulling Aaron into a tight hug. "You will, I promise. When this is all over, I'll take you myself." He released the boy and looked into his raised face. "We'll go on a trip together."

"...You mean it?"

"I said I promised, didn't I?" Garet asked, smiling. "Once we've dealt with these Anemian nut jobs, we'll go."

Aaron stared at him for a few seconds, then jumped at him, flinging his arms around his brother's neck. Garet's own arms returned to their spot around the boy's chest, where they stayed for a while as the sound of raindrops tapping against the window filled the room. As he felt Aaron's fiery hair tickling his nose, Garet smiled. Felix had been right, once again.

He wondered if he could repair his relationship with Kay in the same way.

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Sheba poked at her food idly, stirring the remainder around her plate. The roll of bread still lay next to it, now cold and half-eaten. Her head rested in her empty hand, propped up on her elbow as she gazed down at her plate, not seeing the food anymore.

Her appetite had abandoned her halfway through the meal, but with nothing to do save wait till Felix decided they had recovered enough to leave, she continued to pick at it, not really wanting to move from her seat in the dining hall. Her encounter with Ivan told her that she might be better off avoiding people for a while, at least until she could better come to terms with her feelings.

So far, though, the strategy had succeeded only in that she had not suffered from any more breakdowns. Instead, she simply sat still, thoughts running through her head in circles as her eyes unfocused and drifted to a point far beyond anything she could see. She ignored even the distant thunder that rumbled across the city from the east, growing steadily louder.

She never even noticed Alex until he sat down across from her.

Suddenly startled from her tortuous musings, Sheba sat up quickly, her spoon clattering down onto her plate. Alex raised an eyebrow, an amused smile seizing his lips. "Not very attentive today, are you, Sheba?"

Leaning back in her chair, the girl pressed the palms of her hands to her eyes. "In the last twenty-four hours, I've woken from a near-lethal dose of lightning, disobeyed my mother, run away from home, made my little brother cry, found out my people were genocides, terrified myself into thinking I would turn into a murderer, and nearly alienated one of my closest friends with an overreaction. Not been that great of a day."

The smile did not leave Alex's face, a trait about him that Sheba had never gotten used to. "In that case, let us talk about mundane things. How is the food?" he asked, gesturing to the pair of small pots on the table and the bread basket beside them.

Sheba dropped her hands back on the table, looking down at her own plate. "Alright, I guess. It's rice and some spicy sauce. Not sure what, exactly."

Alex reached out and lifted the lid from one of the pots, peering inside curiously at the brown sauce. "Ah, curry. Very common in southern and eastern Angara. I haven't had it in some time."

As he began scooping rice onto his own plate, Sheba watched him silently, new thoughts finally replacing the troublesome ones. Only realizing after the words had left her mouth that it was rude to try and talk while he was eating, she asked suddenly, "How can you take this so calmly?"

He looked up at her, mildly surprised, and pulled the spoon from his mouth. "Why should I be any other way? A calm mind is the easiest road to solving problems."

She made a face at him as he placed another spoonful of curry into his mouth. "Yeah, that's what my tutors always said, too. What I mean is, how can you control it so well? Do you just not care about what's going on?"

Raising an eyebrow as he casually chewed, Alex finally asked, "Are you accusing me of something, as well?"

Sheba shook her head. "No, nothing like that. You're just...in control. You know that nobody around you trusts you, even though your intentions are good. Doesn't that bother you?"

"That is a situation I've gotten quite used to," he said, setting his spoon down. "I mostly just find it irritating, but I suppose I've earned that. I've spent a lot of time learning to control my emotions, rather than allow them to control me. Felix has done the same."

"Is that all it takes?" she asked. "Time?"

Alex stared at her for a few moments, his expression unreadable. Sheba wondered if expression control came with the emotion control. "Time is not the only factor," he said at last. "To be able to control one's emotions, one must first emotionally invest himself in something all-encompassing. Many people can do this in certain situations, but it is difficult to do at all times. The emotional investment must be kept at the forefront of the mind at all times, to prevent unrelated situations from jeopardizing one's emotions."

Sheba felt her brow furrow on its own. "I'm not sure I understand."

Leaning back in his chair, Alex's eyes swiveled up as he thought. "Take for example...Felix. He'll work well. Felix is a highly protective individual, both of Jenna and you. In everything he does, the protection of you two, as well as others, of course, always factors into his choices. Because he recognizes that letting his emotions take control could place you two in jeopardy, he is able to restrain them."

"But he does get emotional," she said. "I've seen him get angry before."

"I would wager that his anger had something to do with either you or Jenna being in danger, as his substitute for fear. Am I right?"

Every instance she could think of in which Felix had been angry flashed through her mind, and in each one, she realized Alex was right. Only while dangling from the aerie of Venus Lighthouse had she seen him truly afraid. At the time, she thought nothing of the fear in his face, but as she came to know him better, she realized how seldom such displays were.

"But everyone has things they care about, things they're emotionally invested in," Sheba said, looking back at Alex, who had resumed eating while she thought. "Shouldn't everyone be able to control them, then?"

Shaking his head, Alex said, "At times, yes, they can. Even Jenna has her moments in which she controls her moods tightly, but only when her concerns are being thought of and not endangered. Complete control comes when one keeps their primary concern in mind at all times, everything they do working towards it in some fashion." He tapped his chin thoughtfully, leaning back once more. "Now that I think about it, Saturos was quite good at it, as well."

"Saturos? You think so?"

Alex nodded. "Yes. He always held the goal of lighting the lighthouses in his mind, never letting anything divert him from it. It was what made him a good leader, as it did for Felix."

Frowning, Sheba said, "But I saw him angry. A lot, actually."

Alex wagged his finger at her. "Emotional control is not simply hiding or ignoring them, Sheba. A controlled rage is a great weapon in battle. Saturos knew how to focus his rage into defeating the enemy, which is what made him a great warrior. Having control of oneself leads to much success, in many areas."

She leaned onto the table, placing her chin in one hand thoughtfully as Alex resumed eating once again. As she applied his explanation to a few of her friends, she realized it fit well enough – each of them did show control, at least in some situations.

What about Alex, though? What did he invest his emotions into? After all, he served as the walking definition of control; it was his controlled responses that had prompted the discussion in the first place. Could it have been the restoration of Alchemy, as he often claimed? Sheba doubted it. If so, why work so hard for the Golden Sun, then? No, that had obviously been his goal. But what now, if he had willingly set his quest for it aside?

She discarded concern for the world immediately. Very few people could drive themselves on such a vague priority, and she doubted Alex was one of those few. Had the Golden Sun simply been the means to another end, an ultimate goal further down the path?

She briefly considered asking him, then dismissed the idea. He loved his secrets too much for that. At the moment, she decided, it was enough that he had allied himself with them.

"So, now that I've satisfactorily answered your question," he started, his plate now empty, "I wonder if you would answer one of mine." He waited until Sheba looked him in the eyes, then continued. "You said earlier that no one trusts me, but I think that's not quite true. You trust me, don't you, Sheba?"

Sheba continued to look at him for a few moments, then looked away ashamedly. "...I trust that you won't do anything to place Mia in harm's way, yes. Since leaving the...this whole situation alone would get her hurt, I believe that you want to help us stop it."

"And what makes you think that?" he asked. "I'm not contradicting you, I just wish to know what makes you one of the two people to trust me."

"Because..." She hesitated. Did he even know she had done this? Would he care, even though it had been almost a year ago? No, she thought, he had never gotten angry the other times. "When we met you in Jupiter Lighthouse, I read your mind as we passed. You wanted to help Mia. Even though you were focused on lighting the lighthouse, you wanted to wait and rescue her first. It's the only emotional slip I've seen from you."

Alex's eyebrows raised slightly, then folded his hands on the table in front of him. "Interesting. I never realized that had happened. I applaud you on that, then. You're right, of course. I wanted to rescue her myself. The only thing that stopped me was Felix, actually."

"Felix?"

Nodding, Alex continued. "Felix has this uncanny ability to win people over to his cause. I felt that, if Felix could save Isaac and his friends, he might be able to win them over. A larger group would have a simpler time firing Mars' beacon. Apparently, I won that gamble."

Sheba nodded slowly, confusion overtaking her thoughts. How could she believe both Ivan and Alex? It seemed contradictory to think it, but she realized that she did anyway. Both of them seemed so very sure of themselves in the matter.

"I need to...get some things together," she said, kicking herself for the lame excuse the instant it left her mouth.

Alex made no sign that he knew of her lie. "I will see you when we leave, then."

Sheba wiped her mouth, stood up, and pushed in her chair. As she walked around the table, lightning snapped just outside the window, striking the metal rod atop the palace. In the same instant, thunder tore through the walls in a ferocious blast. Sheba immediately shrieked and dropped down, covering her head with her hands.

By the time she realized what had happened, Alex had already stood up, making his way towards her. "What is it?" he asked.

Feeling like a child as she straightened up, Sheba dropped her arms back to her side and looked away. "Nothing, I... Nothing."

Alex frowned, but did not press the matter. Grateful, Sheba began to walk away again. Only after she had stepped into the hallway and leaned against the wall to let her heart slow

did she realize that Alex had been showing concern, at least some.

He had just been concealing it.

Chapter 6: Gathering Allies

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 6 – Gathering Allies

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The scratching of his quill on the papers filled Ivan's ears with sound. Nothing else moved, nothing else mattered except the paperwork he had fallen behind on. The words on them blurred together as he wrote endlessly, the mound of unfinished work seemingly growing larger and larger.

"*Ivan, come on! Let's go!*"

The boy turned around to find Isaac standing in the study, a grin on his face and gesturing for Ivan to follow. "I can't," he said. "I've got to finish this work."

Isaac's grin only widened. "What work?"

Ivan glanced back at his desk and found it completely devoid of papers, barring the one on which he had been writing, which was now blank. Instantly nervous, he stood up and began searching around the desk, wondering if a breeze had blown them to the floor, or if Garet had played a prank on him. If he lost those papers...

"*Ivan, come on.*"

He paused, recognizing the voice as Mia's, but before he could turn and ask, a hand grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the desk. As he stumbled through the doorway, he turned and found himself exiting his cabin on Babi's ship. Glancing back, he saw the furniture from his study in there,

and decided he must have moved it there so he could continue working while traveling.

As he turned back, he realized Mia's hand had grabbed him, not Isaac's. She continued pulling him to the bow, but a sudden drop of water caused him to stop and look up. A dreary gray covered the sky from horizon to horizon, dropping a fog down to the ocean in the distance. Another drop of water landed on his forehead, then one on his cheek, and then the sky opened up to unleash a torrential downpour.

"*Mia," he called, looking back down, "let's go back inside. It's raining." Mia could not be seen any more, though. In fact, the deck was devoid of life, save him. He turned back around, searching for Isaac, but he had vanished as well.*

Assuming Mia had just grabbed Isaac while he had been distracted by the rain, he walked back into his cabin and shut the door. After glancing at his desk and deciding that he had no desire to do more paperwork, he climbed into his rack, threw the blanket over himself, and went to sleep.

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Isaac looked over as both Hama and Mia entered the study, taking up spots on the wall opposite him. Ivan stood next to him, even more silent than normal. Garet leaned against Kraden's desk in front of the window, Aaron seated on top, while the old man sat behind it, scribbling away at some document. Jenna and Sheba each sat in one of the chairs in front of the desk, talking quietly about something. Alex stood beside the window, his arms crossed on his chest.

Once the door had closed again, Felix cleared his throat from where he stood beside Kraden, causing the old man to set

down his quill. "Alright, now that everyone's here, I'd like to discuss our next moves."

"At the moment," Kraden began, "we know Imil is fine, now, and that Lalivero is untouched. Unconfirmed still are Prox, Lemuria, Champa, and Contigo, but Champa is the only one we are worried about."

"Assuming that Anemos only has Jupiter Adepts, and that Hama's dreams were accurate in this matter, we think Prox has been struck by an enormous sealing spell." Felix's mouth twitched during the brief pause in his words, but otherwise, Isaac saw no indication of the worry he knew the man felt. "I know they have means to survive until the seal wears off, but that could be days. I would like to visit personally, taking Alex with me to lift the seal. Sheba will be our transport.

"Lemuria seems to have encountered a hurricane," he continued. "I don't expect these are new to them, but this could potentially draw Piers back there. Since we still haven't been able to catch him, I want to send a small party there to wait for him, and also assist with anything they need. Mia, I'd like you and Garet to do this."

"Will they let me in?" she asked. "I know they're very isolationist."

Kraden nodded. "As a healer of Imil, member of the Mercury Clan, and fellow Mercury Adept, I don't see a problem with you getting in. Just...don't mention us. Say you got lost in the hurricane."

"They won't check for our boat?" Garet asked.

"No reason to," Kraden said, smiling slightly. "How else would you get there?"

The door opened suddenly, one of Kraden's young servants peering inside. Isaac thought he looked rather similar to Ivan. "I apologize, my lord, but a letter has just arrived for you."

"Thank you, I'll deal with it when I'm done here," Kraden said, dismissing him with a wave of his hand.

The boy did not move. "It was marked as high priority, sir. From Lemuria."

Kraden's eyebrows rose, followed shortly by the rest of him. "I'll go take this, then. Keep going, Felix, we've already talked enough about the plans." He pushed in his chair before stepping around the desk and following the servant out into the hallway.

"Our last group will head to Champa," Felix said once the door shut again. "Jenna, they'll remember you, so you shouldn't have a problem there. The suspected damage should be mostly around Ankohl Tower, but the tornadoes may have come close to Champa itself. Given that the entire city is cliffs and docks, if they did, expect severe damage. Ivan, you'll be the transport."

"What about Contigo?" Ivan asked. "Isn't anyone going there?"

Felix shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea. Anemos likely settled back down there, to stay close to the lighthouse, in case they needed to use it again. By now, they've probably realized the state of the world, and aren't rushing for anything."

Isaac frowned. "Couldn't Hama go, though? She's a Jupiter Adept, so they won't hurt her."

"That won't matter," Hama said. "I am Quetzalcoatl, the leader of Contigo. If they don't kill me outright to establish dominance, they'll force me to help them under pain of death."

"You could use that to help any non-Jupiter Adepts escape Contigo, though," Sheba said.

She shook her head. "Deceit of a Jupiter Adept is a difficult task. I wouldn't dare try it with them."

None of them had thought about that, Isaac realized as he watched everyone's faces. How do you keep a secret from someone who can read minds? How do you catch someone by surprise if they can see the future? How do you hide something from the eye that sees the truth?

"Regardless," Felix continued, "Hama cannot teleport without the aid of the lapis yet, so we're limited to three groups at any time. Unless Alex can teleport," he said casually, glancing over his shoulder at the man.

Alex simply shrugged. "It's a possibility. I've yet to try it, but I imagine if I used the lapis once to understand how, I would figure it out. As Hama has pointed out, though, travel to Contigo is ill-advised for now. Let Anemos grow docile as they realize the state of the world, while we gather information on how best to stop them."

"Is that why we're being so secretive about this meeting?" Jenna asked, nodding her head to the door.

"Yes," Felix said. "I don't want any word of our plans to get to Anemian ears. They'll know powerful Adepts still exist; the lighthouses are lit, after all. However, I think they'll have difficulty trying to pin us down right now. Weyard, though recovering from her hibernation, is still a big world."

Mia leaned forward, shaking her head. "But won't they-"

At the sound of the door opening, she fell silent. Kraden stepped back inside, shut the door behind him, then turned to look at them all. "I think we might have a change of plans."

He ignored the questions nearly all of them called out immediately, returning to his desk and sitting back down with a soft groan. Placing the letter on the desk in front of him, he folded his hands in front of it as Felix began reading over his shoulder. "This letter is from Lunpa. Piers has been found."

Jenna whooped loudly. "Let's get him, then!"

Shaking his head, Kraden said, "He's not been ahead of our letters. He's been stranded in Champa for almost three months."

Felix swore quietly, obviously reading ahead of Kraden's words. "But his boat's been all over the place," Garet said. "People have seen it everywhere in the Eastern Sea."

"It was stolen," Kraden said calmly. "Pirates stole it while he was in Champa. My guess is that he had forgotten everyone could use Psynergy, now."

"Meaning everyone could get into his boat." Ivan groaned, tilting his head back. "He's been there this entire time, probably trying to get ahold of someone."

Kraden nodded. "Lemuria only just got a message from Piers recently. He's probably tried sending them by land, but unless birds are carefully trained, they'll get lost easily. Sending one to Lemuria, though much more difficult, ensures the letter will go to the island, if anywhere."

"We'll need to pick him up in Champa, then," Jenna said.

"And then get his ship back," Hama said. "The time will come when we'll not want to be recovering from teleportation upon arrival somewhere. Also, the ship will allow us to pursue Anemos should it return to the sky."

"That's not all," Felix said, looking up from the desk. "King Hydros is asking for us, specifically."

"Noted. We can put it on our list of things to do," Garet said, rolling his eyes.

Shaking his head, Kraden said, "Hydros is an old and powerful Adept, Garet. We would do well to have his help in this fight."

Jenna looked up at her brother. "What do you want to do, then?"

Felix said nothing for a few seconds, his eyes staring back down at the letter. At times like this, Felix reminded Isaac why he had taken leadership of their group: Isaac simply had no idea what to do right now. Felix always managed to distribute each of them where they would be most effective, often with very little thought. Given time, Isaac could draft up good plans, but to Felix, such preparations seemed to be instinctual.

"Hama and I will head to Champa for Piers," he said at last. "The rest of you will head for Lemuria and inform them of our delay. We'll meet up with you there. If you should need to separate, split into two groups and meet back here. If Tolbi is compromised, go to...Prox."

"What? Why are only you and Hama going?" Sheba asked, sounding slightly indignant.

"I don't expect trouble in Champa," Felix said, "so I don't want too many people to go, but if there is, I'd like as well-rounded a group as possible."

Hama nodded. "I agree. Between the two of us, we should at least be able to get out of any trouble."

Felix looked over at Isaac. "You'll be in charge of everyone until I get back, Isaac. If something happens, keep everyone safe."

"I will." He maintained a straight face, but on the inside, Isaac felt his insides harden. Playing leader had been a necessity before Mia joined them, and by that point, none of them wanted to follow anyone else, but he had turned leadership over to Felix gladly. A good friend, sure. A good follower, absolutely. A good leader? He had never thought so, though others often told him otherwise.

Nodding, Felix turned to Hama again as he walked around the desk. "Grab what you need, then meet me outside. We'll leave now."

The two walked out together, leaving everyone to stare at Isaac. He swallowed, feeling it pass by that long-avoided lump in his throat. "Alright, let's get together some supplies. I want a week's worth of food packed, just in case. Make sure you've all got your cloaks and a spare set of clothes. Keep it light, though. If we wind up needing them, then we're going to be on the run."

"I'll see to getting you the food," Kraden said, standing. "Ivan, would you come with me?"

"Of course, Kraden," the boy said immediately, following him out, though not before looking at Isaac, then turning his gaze pointedly at Alex for a few seconds.

"I can take the hint," the man said before Isaac could reply, pushing himself away from the window and stretching briefly. "I'll be waiting by the door."

Garet waited for him to leave, then pulled a very reluctant Aaron down from the desk. "I'll be in my room. Give me a knock when we're ready."

Isaac nodded, stepping forward as they walked by, moving in the opposite direction towards the great window. His hand reached up and gently touched the charm that hung on the chain around his neck, his eyes taking in the imagery. Whatever faults Babi had, he certainly knew how to demonstrate flair. The window, though made entirely of clear panes of glass, had been divided into segments by pieces of wrought iron that twisted across the wall's opening. At a quick glance, the lack of color would make one think the bars had just been haphazardly assembled, but upon a closer inspection one would find a map of the world.

Though Isaac, as he looked at it, could tell the map had lost accuracy with time, as Felix had told them. The Karagol, though already an enormous sea, seemed to be massive enough to swallow the entire Suhallan Desert. Certainly more than a week's journey to cross, he guessed. It took him a few more moments of looking to realize that Lemuria had not shrunk, Indra had simply *moved.* He gaped as understanding dawned on him, amazed by the idea of such an enormous continent actually moving.

"Wild, isn't it?"

He dropped his hand as he turned around to find the girls watching him, though Jenna had been the one to ask. A small smile played around her and Sheba's faces, though the window very quickly stole Mia's attention, as well. "I've

never seen an old map before," Isaac said, shaking his head. "It's incredible seeing how much has actually changed."

"If you think that's crazy, you should have seen the ancient one," Sheba said. "Hydros had a map from when *he* was young, and it looked nothing like Weyard. At all."

"Look," Mia said, pointing to the top of the window. "It looks like even Prox used to be connected to the continents."

Isaac followed her finger and realized she was right. Instead of the scattered pieces of icebergs that floated in the northern sea, a very solid land bridge connected from Imil to Prox, though the former seemed like it had shifted since. "It really makes you wonder just how important all these places were in the past."

Mia nodded. "Like all the places we saw, too. Remember the ruins beneath Altin? I've looked, but I've never found anything that talked about a civilization there. We're the first people in hundreds of years to know about it."

"Yep," Jenna said. "We found stuff like that, too. Old remnants of cities, ancient towers, that sort of thing."

Mia looked back to the map. "And if we're not careful, people hundreds of years from now will find our cities and wonder who built them."

Both Jenna and Sheba fell silent, looking at each other briefly. Isaac felt that familiar weight settle over his shoulders, nestling in comfortably across the back of his neck. At least this time, he had much more help, he supposed. When he had first left Vale, he had absolutely no idea how to go about accomplishing his goals, but now, he knew they would just need to organize themselves. He firmly

believed that, together, their strength could counter that of Anemos.

It would just be incredibly dangerous.

"Let's get finished packing," he said, stepping away from the window. "I don't want to keep Hydros waiting."

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"Felix, do you have a history here that you neglected to mention?"

"...I may not be on the best of terms with some of the city."

Felix glanced around the docks again, fighting back his stomach's turbulent urges while trying to count how many sailors had gathered arms the moment they caught sight of him. At around twenty his vision swam and he became unsure of which he had already counted, then gave up. The number did not matter.

"Look," he said, "I'm not here to cause trouble. I just need to-"

"We remember the last time you came," a middle-aged sailor said quietly, holding his sword confidently. "The explosions from the upper chambers shook the whole cliff."

"That wasn't-"

"Briggs even warned us you might come back," another said, this one about Felix's age. "Said you would want to settle things with him."

"Said you were probably still sore about last time."

Felix rolled his eyes, then glanced at Hama. "How good are you at controlling your hits?"

Raising an eyebrow, Hama said humorlessly, "Good enough to leave them with nothing more than a splitting headache...when they wake up six hours from now."

Turning back to the sailors, Felix held up three fingers. "You've got three seconds to move out of my way." One finger dropped. "Otherwise..." Another finger dropped. "...I'll move you myself." His last finger dropped, and with it, the wooden planks of the pier. All around them, the sounds of splintering wood and splashes could be heard as the majority of the men fell through the newly created holes, floundering about in confusion.

Hama gestured at the few that remained in their way, quickly relocating them to the water. Their path clear, Felix hopped forward, stepping onto the vertical log that once held a section of the pier and using it to cross the gap. Hama chose not to bother, simply making the leap in one jump. As she landed, Felix glanced at her. She replied with another raised eyebrow, but he simply shook his head and began walking.

He could hear shouting from the docks as they reached land, but no one else chose to follow. A wise decision, he thought; a Venus Adept on the water had limited supplies to work with, but one on land knew no such restrictions.

Granted, nor did a Chi-trained Jupiter Adept. Felix felt a mild disappointment creep in; he had disposed of their welcoming party so fast that he had not had the opportunity to see Hama fight. As a master of kung fu, one trained in mystical energies of both mind and body, Felix suspected

that the woman utilized a fighting style he would never again see replicated.

He knew she could fight, and fight well, of course. One did not become so highly revered in the martial arts world without significant skill, after all. That aside, however, Felix never passed up an opportunity to watch a new style, to see what aspects of combat its user focused on, to learn new mindsets that could help him fight. His journey had already given him many such opportunities, but he had no intention of halting his self-improvement. A warrior who became content with his skills became lax, and soon dead.

As they walked through the brief stretch of town that resided on flat land, he glanced around at the other townspeople. Most seemed to ignore them, though a few stopped to watch curiously, their attention drawn by the commotion from the docks, most likely. None bothered to try and divert them, or even seemed to care. One young woman's face lit up in recognition before she smiled shyly at Felix, raising her hand in a small wave.

"Not the best of terms, hmm?" Hama asked with a smile.

"I have no idea who she is," Felix said honestly, raising his hand briefly in response. "Apparently, I have a few conflicting reputations around here."

Hama made a sound of agreement. "Both feared and loved. What man could possibly remain unswayed when surrounded by such strong convictions?"

Felix glanced over at the woman for a moment, then looked forward again. "I never would have suspected you to be such a heavy reader, Master Hama."

"Oh?" She tilted her head to the side, obviously amused. "And what makes you think I have time for reading between training my Chi, training my Psynergy, training my kung fu, training my students, interpreting my visions, and orchestrating events to allow you to save the world?"

"You've the rhetoric of either a scholar or an orator."

"I could say the same of you."

Smiling, Felix said, "I suppose you could call me an apprentice scholar. Kraden's dug his talons in too far, I'm afraid."

"You're right, of course," she said after a moment. "I frequently read while meditating. It allows me to train my mind to focus on two opposing tasks simultaneously, something very important in utilizing both Chi and Psynergy. Where exactly are we headed?"

Felix stopped, looking up. They had reached the cliffs, the nest of tunnels waiting inside to carry them throughout the city proper. From the cave mouth, Felix could hear the long-traveled echoes of voices, occasionally punctuated by the crash of waves against a lower mouth. Last time he had visited, Briggs had doused all the torches in the cavernous paths, forcing Jenna to lead them all through. This time, he had obviously not arrived with enough warning for Briggs to have taken all his preparations.

That made things much simpler. "We're going to find the leader of Champa, Briggs. He knows Piers, so if anyone knows where he is, Briggs will. If he doesn't..." Felix shrugged. "We convince him to remember."

Hama looked at him for a moment in silence. "You're quite merciless when in a rush, aren't you?"

"I'm not in much of a mood for negotiations right now," he said shortly, starting into the tunnel. "Briggs is a pirate. He responds to violence, not words, so I've got no intention of wasting them on him."

"So do you think his men stole the boat, then?"

"Not on his orders," Felix said, shaking his head. "He said he only pirated out of necessity, to keep his people fed. Unless they planned on eating the ship..."

He continued on in silence, trying to remember the way around. The tunnels looked significantly different in the light, and their slight curving threw off his sense of direction. All he could really remember was that they needed to go up.

A small, red-headed child stepped from around the corner up ahead, dragging a wooden sword along the ground behind him. For one wild moment, Felix thought Aaron had somehow followed them to Champa. It faded immediately, though, when he realized the child in front of him could not be older than four, yet had probably twice as much hair as Aaron. Still, he did look familiar...

"Eoleo?" he called and the boy turned to him. "Do you remember me, Eoleo?"

The mass of red nodded, then pointed at him. "You're Felix. Papa was talking about you."

"Was he? Could you take me to him?"

Eoleo continued to stare at Felix for a few moments before responding. "He says you're gonna hurt him."

Felix sighed. While he had been willing to use force only minutes before, if Eoleo was present, he doubted he could bring himself to it. "I just want to talk to him, Eoleo. I'm looking for one of our friends."

"I know," the boy said calmly. "Papa's just afraid you'll get angry."

Felix's eyes narrowed slightly. What would Briggs be afraid of him getting angry about? Before he could open his mouth to ask, though, another voice echoed through the tunnels. "Eoleo! Eoleo, lunch is ready!"

The boy waved at them, then turned around and walked back the way he came. Felix shared a brief glance with Hama, then followed the child. Eoleo gave no indication that he knew they were following, nor any that he cared. He navigated the path much more confidently than Felix had, his sandaled feet tapping out a steady, quick rhythm on the smooth rock.

As they turned a corner after him, the boy had vanished. A thick, red curtain covered one section of the wall, swaying slightly. Cautiously reaching out with one hand, the other resting on his sword, he slowly pulled aside one half of the curtain, peering inside.

No ambush awaited him, nor a trap of any kind, so he entered, holding the curtain up for Hama. Inside, Eoleo sat at a table, swinging his feet at the edge of the chair, a sandwich in his hands. His mother, Chaucha, stood across from him at the table, slicing up a loaf of bread with her back to the door. Felix could hear her humming a tune softly while she worked, though he did not recognize it.

After a few seconds, Chaucha placed the knife down, stacking the bread onto a wooden plate, then turned

around. Immediately her hand reached back and grabbed the kitchen knife again, holding it out threateningly. A moment later she lowered it, recognizing him. "Felix! You startled me..."

"Sorry, Chaucha, that wasn't my intent," he said, bowing his head briefly. "I also don't mean to intrude, but..."

"You're looking for my husband."

He looked back up to find her eyes locked on him, her whole body tensing again, before he remembered Eoleo's words. "I only want to talk to him," he said quickly. "I'm looking for Piers."

Chaucha relaxed, though only slightly, then set the plate of bread back down on the table. "Yes, he's here. Did one of his messages finally get to someone? We don't have any trained birds here, so he wasn't sure if they were getting anywhere."

Felix nodded. "Indirectly, but yes, we got word he was stranded here when pirates stole his ship."

The woman's hands rung at the front of her apron, then smoothed it down again. "And is that why you're looking for Briggs?"

Before Felix could reply, Hama stepped up next to him. "Miss...Chaucha, was it? I am Master Hama, of Lama Temple. I apologize for interrupting, but I think we will get through this faster if you tell us what you know...and why you're so nervous. We're here only to get Piers, nothing more."

Chaucha looked over at Eoleo, who smiled at her from behind his sandwich. She returned the smile, then sat down. "Piers docked here a few months ago, seeing what work he could find. During the night, some...people stole his ship and

sailed it away. All of our seafaring ships are currently out, leaving only the fishing boats, so he had no way of leaving."

Hama nodded. "And who are these people?"

She glanced away, falling silent, but Felix had figured it out. "They're Champan, aren't they? You thought if I found out it was stolen by Champans, I would think your husband was at fault."

"He's not, though!" she said heatedly, looking back at him. "He's stayed true to his word! The seas calmed and the fish returned. Food hasn't been an issue, and he hasn't stolen anything. But...some others...found the ease of piracy too tempting. They've been at odds about it for months, and when Piers showed up, they saw their opportunity."

"Trust me, if I could get my hands on them, I'd break their legs so they could never sail again."

Felix turned back to the doorway to find Briggs standing there, filling the frame with his enormous stature. "Hello again, Briggs."

The man nodded curtly, eying him warily. "Felix. I've sent for Piers." He paused briefly, then said, "You do believe us, don't you?"

"Oh, I'm not entirely sure." Felix folded his arms, finding a small amusement in watching the sweat form on the sailor's forehead. "We received a strange welcome, given your supposed innocence. Why would every sailor on the docks suddenly try and stop us from finding you?"

Briggs glanced at Chaucha briefly, then at Hama, then back at Felix. "Well, eh, I'm sure they were just, y'know, thinking of the last time you were here."

"Oh?" Felix raised an eyebrow, making sure to tilt his head to exaggerate the effect. "That's odd, because I'm fairly certain one of them mentioned how you said I might come back to... What was it again?" he asked, turning to Hama.

The woman clenched her teeth together as she answered. Felix suspected that it was simply to avoid smiling, but it had the added effect of making her look angry. "Something about settling scores."

"That's right, that," Felix said, looking back at Briggs and fixing him with a cold glare. "Now, what might I be settling, here?"

Briggs fidgeted slightly, then stepped back once. "Well, I might have, uh, told the events of our last meeting a bit differently than how it actually happened. Purely for morale reasons, of course! I had become a beacon of sorts for Champa, and I didn't want that hope squashed because of...well, you know."

Felix continued to glare at Briggs in silence for a few long seconds, before he heard the sound of giggling behind him. "You're funny," Eoleo said. "But I think Papa really believes you."

The sailor looked at his son, then back at Felix, who could no longer restrain the small grin that crept onto his face. "Consider that your punishment for lying," Felix said, his hands shifting to his hips. "You're got a smart son. He'll make a good pirate some day."

Frowning, Briggs said, "That's not funny. Eoleo is the last person I want to see turn to pirating."

"If we didn't have more pressing..." Felix's voice trailed off as the curtains parted once more, a blue-haired head poking

inside. "Well, well. If it isn't the Lost One."

Piers grinned and stepped inside, embracing Felix tightly. "I see someone finally received my message. How are things?"

Felix stepped back, looking down. "I suppose news hasn't quite reached here yet. We've...got some problems."

As he told them of the reason behind their sudden twisters, Chaucha seated them all at the table and served them fresh fish sandwiches. Eoleo, already finished with his, continued to sit patiently at the table, resting his cheeks on his hands and listening intently to Felix.

"We'd heard rumors about Anemos, but this...this sounds bad," Briggs said after a long silence, glancing at Eoleo. "So these Jupiter Adepts...they control wind?"

"And lightning," Hama said. "Among other things."

"Doesn't sound like Eoleo's powers, then," he said softly, staring at his son.

Hama turned her own gaze to the boy and examined him unblinkingly for a moment. "No. Your son wields the power of Mars, that of fire. He is at danger."

Chaucha dropped her chin into her hands, covering her mouth. "What can we do?"

"Nothing," Hama said. "The Anemoi are too much for you to help against directly."

"Then let us help you with what we can," she said quickly. "Please. If there's anything we can do, let us know."

A brief moment of silence filled the room before Hama said in a soft voice, "Actually...there is something we still need."

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Piers hauled himself over the rails, his boots landing on the deck of the *Kailani* in a loud thud. Several of the men that shared it with him looked over, curious as to the source of the noise. Immediately a cry went out as they drew their weapons, surrounding him at the brow.

Sighing, Piers said, "You do realize I'm taking my ship back, and that nothing you do can stop me, don't you?"

"And just how do you plan on moving her, exactly?" one asked. "She's beached, you half-wit."

"You steal the world's only flying ship and then forget what makes her unique? Who is the half-wit, exactly?" Piers shook his head. "I want you all off the *Kailani*, now."

Another pirate laughed. "Why would we walk off *our* ship, exactly? You're significantly outnumbered, even with your skill in Psynergy."

Piers raised an eyebrow. "I never said you were *walking* off." He leaned back against the railing, holding onto it as the pirates cast wary glances at each other. By the time one of them decided to respond, though, the sand below the hull shifted, listing the ship heavily to her starboard side. Each of the pirates shouted in surprise as they tumbled into the railing, then fell over it, some with Piers' help. After the last had fallen, he turned around, looked down towards the men sprawled in the sand, and called out, "Alright, that's it."

The sand shifted again, returning the ship to her proper orientation. Once it settled, Felix walked around from the

opposite side with Hama, stepping around the groaning bodies. After both had hopped the rails, Felix turned around and rolled the rope ladder back up, tying it down to the deck.

Piers closed his eyes, sending out a small pulse of Psynergy. When he found the familiar resonance of a pair of alchemy tools, he opened them again and said, "The orb is still on board, as is the jade. I just want to clear the cabins, and then we'll be off."

They followed him into the main cabin, where several of the items that the pirates had unstowed, likely with the intent of escaping with, had rolled about with the ship. Piers moved to the back of the cabin, to the stairs that led below decks.

As they arrived on the lower deck, Felix said, "We'll check the aft ones." He motioned to Hama to follow, then stepped inside and down the hallway.

Piers moved in the opposite direction. He opened each door, moving into the room carefully and checking for potential stowaways. Waking up with a knife in his chest ranked rather low on his list of goals.

As he opened the door to his own cabin, though, Felix and Hama appeared at the other end of the hallway, circled the entire deck. He turned to them with a raised eyebrow. "Done already?"

Felix merely jerked his thumb at Hama. "Jupiter."

Piers nodded. "Right, that makes it much simpler. In that case, would you mind checking the rest of the passage? Less likely to get ambushed if we don't have to open doors."

Hama nodded. "The boat is clear, by the way. I was able to see through the entire thing, and we're the only ones here."

"Thank you." He reached back to pull the door shut, then stopped suddenly. Instead, he stepped into the room, staring at a pair of empty hooks on the bulkhead. "Those thieving scoundrels..."

He spun around, slamming the door shut, causing Felix to turn back around, his hand flying to his blade. "What?"

"The Trident," Piers said softly. "They stole it."

"Oh." Felix relaxed, then folded his arms across his chest. "Well, if that's all that's missing, then-"

"All that's missing?" the sailor nearly shouted. "Felix, other than the *Kailani*, that is about the only thing I own that matters to me! That Trident is an ancient artifact, designed to utterly destroy those of Mercury's power. He who holds it has the potential to rule the sea. Can you imagine what would happen if someone were to get their hands on it?"

Felix frowned. "What would you do, then? In all likelihood, they pawned it off somewhere, not realizing its value."

"We could pursue them and ask," Hama said, returning. "None are left on board, and our only clues are currently fleeing towards the ruins to the east."

"Towards Ankohl Tower?" Felix tapped his chin thoughtfully. "The tower has only one exit, unless you want to jump from the top."

Instead of answering, Piers threw open the door and stepped back outside, Felix and Hama following. "Felix, if you would be so kind," he said, gesturing down to the beach.

With a wave of Felix's hand, the sands rose up to the edge of the deck and all three stepped onto them. He then lowered them back to the beach where they found, just as Hama had said, the entire pirate compliment missing.

Piers led the way to the tower in silence, setting a fast pace. Would they really have simply sold the Trident? Successful pirates needed to be capable of assessing their goods, in order to make the maximum profit off them. Swindling a pirate typically proved to be a highly difficult task, even for the most silver-tongued of merchants.

In addition, pirates doubled as seasoned warriors, and all good warriors knew how to judge a weapon's quality and craft. The Trident, though worn by time, had been restored to pristine condition in Obaba's forge. Any warrior worth his salt could merely have glanced at the weapon, then elaborated in great detail on the high caliber of workmanship.

And then there was the issue of the inherent Psynergy forged into the weapon. Jupiter nearly radiated from the Trident, plainly obvious to any Adept who touched it. With everyone in the world gaining at least the ability to recognize Psynergy, any who held it would feel the power inside. That, if nothing else, would arouse the suspicions of any sailor, as all knew the legend of the Trident.

No, if it had been sold, they would have easily made enough gold to have retired from piracy, Piers decided. They still held it, and judging by how quickly the group had fled to the tower, he guessed the remaining members had holed up inside until the ship could be freed.

All those who had participated in the theft of his ship, his Trident, and his freedom, all locked inside the same tower?

Piers rarely let his anger control him, but he could feel it growing inside as they walked. He doubted it would take hold, but he felt justified in letting a small amount burn while searching for the Trident.

"Look..." he heard Felix mutter. Glancing up, he saw the man pointing to their side at a great gash in the landscape.

"It's from the twisters," Hama said quietly, almost reverently. She looked around them, then gestured at two other gashes. "This must have been where they touched down."

"Champa is lucky," Felix said, eying the line of upturned grass, soil, shrubs, and trees. "Those would have ripped it apart entirely." Piers said nothing; nothing more needed to be said. The words brought an image of the possibilities to his mind clearly enough.

A short while later, they stood in the courtyard of the ruined tower, looking up. "They'll flee as we come, heading for the top," Felix said. "Even if they know there's no exit, they'll do it out of instinct."

"Then we will follow them to the top," Piers said. "I need words with the man who holds my Trident, and I expect that words will come to blows. Such men do not often surrender their takings willingly."

Felix smiled at him. "There are times when I prefer it that way."

Returning the grin, Piers crossed through the doorway, stepping into the tower proper. The harsh sunlight instantly vanished, forcing him to blink several times before his eyes adjusted to the dimness, slits in the stone now his only source of light. He stepped in further to allow Felix and

Hama to follow, then waited, looking around as his vision returned.

The walls, though already in poor condition from generations of wear, seemed to be cracked even more. In one corner, Piers could see a tree root snaking inside, slowly but unquestionably destroying the foundation. Had the return of Alchemy sped up the growth of plants? No trees had encroached on this area when they had last walked these empty halls, merely ivy and other small flora, likely born from seeds carried on the wind.

It had to be Alchemy's effect, he realized. They had visited here not even a year prior; no trees grew that fast normally. He frowned at the thought. What other effects had the restoration unknowingly caused? How would other areas of the world begin to shift? In a few years, Venus would reclaim Ankohl Tower by force, using her verdant arms to bring the tower down from the base. Would other structures succumb to Weyard's wishes in similar fashions? If so, he doubted they would all be abandoned ruins such as these. Nature knew no prejudices.

Glancing down at the ground, he could see the disturbances in the light layer of dust and sand that coated everything. In the center of a sea of small ripples, entire stretches of bare stone lay, the sand moved forward or to the side. The marks continued forward, moving around the shattered floor and vanishing through another doorway.

Piers turned around and gestured at the ground, his finger following the path. Felix nodded, the gestured for him to continue. Piers nodded, then moved forward, Felix and Hama falling into step behind him.

When he reached the far doorway, a dry, stale smell immediately assaulted his senses, forcing free an expression of disgust that the others never saw. He quickly forced it away as his nostrils accustomed themselves to the musty odor, though it left a foul taste that lingered in his mouth, no amount of swallowing able to remove it. He coughed once, then continued further into the tower.

"They've all moved up already," Felix said suddenly, his normally soft voice loud among the silent stones. "I don't know if they saw us, or if they're simply gathering."

"It doesn't matter," Hama said. "Even if they're trying to mount a defense, they'll just find it useless."

Felix glanced at Piers. "Are you alright?"

Nodding, he said, "Perfectly fine."

"...No, I mean, are you *alright?"*

Piers stopped and looked back at him, sighing. "I'll be fine, Felix. I was a bit angry earlier, but it's dulled now. I just want to get the Trident and leave."

Felix frowned. "Are you sure? I don't want to see you do something you'll later regret."

Raising an eyebrow and smiling slightly, Piers said, "Concern for the lives of pirates? How unlike you, Felix."

"Don't misunderstand me," the brown-haired man said. "I'm not concerned for them, I'm concerned for you."

A short laugh, quickly silenced, drew both of their attentions. Hama covered her mouth, fighting down a smile.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "It's just...odd. I'm used to hearing it the other way around from Feizhi."

"Feizhi?" Piers asked, looking over at Felix. "Wasn't she..."

He nodded. "The girl in Champa. The one that knew Isaac. You said she's the other way around?" he asked Hama.

"Yes, completely. Before anything else, she will deny her concern for another to their face, yet be the first to work herself to death to help them...but only when she thinks they aren't watching."

"Almost like Jenna," Felix muttered quietly, causing Piers to grin.

"How is she? And the others?" he asked, glancing around a corner.

"They're doing fine, all things considered. We've had a bad few days, but everyone is managing." Felix looked at him. "What about you? What have you been doing while marooned for the past few months?"

Piers shook his head. "If I never see a bird again, I will consider myself fortunate." Felix chuckled quietly, but said nothing. "You think I exaggerate? When we have time, I want to see *you* try and send a message by an untrained bird."

As they approached the door at the end of the hallway, Piers noticed the sand that had spilled from the room beyond on the floor in front. Stopping, he gestured for Felix to proceed, falling into step behind him. With a wave of his hand, the sand parted for Felix, flying to the sides of the wide chamber and piling up like a hoard of gold.

A sudden clatter of steel made the three stop, looking forward. Atop the sand on the other side of the room stood several men, now with drawn swords. Piers stepped up beside Felix and folded his arms, recognizing some of them as ones he had forcefully ejected from his boat. "I hope you weren't thinking about actually *keeping* my Trident, now."

Two of them looked at each other nervously, but a third shouted, "You're far from your boat, Piers! Your sorcerous Psynergy won't help you here!"

Felix snorted. "You should probably learn something about Alchemy before telling an experienced Adept what he can or cannot do." The sand beneath their feet suddenly crumbled, flowing down towards Felix like a river and carrying the men in its current. Their voices alternated between angry shouting and muffled panicking as they tumbled through the sand.

When they finally flopped onto the stone limply, the sands receding around them, Piers rolled one over onto his back with his foot. "Where is it?" he asked quietly. "Where is my Trident?"

The man propped himself up onto an elbow, leaned his head over, and coughed up sand. "Up," he said weakly. "Virote has it..."

Piers' eyes, which had been scanning the other prone forms, snapped back to the man as he crouched beside him. "Did you say Virote?"

Nodding, the pirate coughed again as Piers stood up, glancing over the others one more time. "Do you know this Virote, Piers?" Hama asked.

"I do," he said. "He sailed with me recently, as a member of my crew. I suspect it was he who helped these lowlifes board my boat."

Felix waved his hand, fragments of stone jutting up from the ground around the ankles of each of the men, locking them there. "We'll let you out on our way back through. Unless this Virote kills us, of course, in which case you're stuck here. Might want to rethink about who to root for."

The man groaned, making a few futile attempts at freeing his leg before giving up and lying back down as the three stepped around him.

As they moved for the central spire of the tower, Piers could not help but marvel at how easy they found the travel. In their last visit here, they had spent almost an entire day reaching the top, exhausted by the end of it all. Now, in barely an hour, they had arrived at the final ascent, not tired in the slightest. To be sure, Felix's skill in manipulating the sands made such travel possible; where they had spent hours trying to use the tower's mechanics to adjust the sand flows, Felix bypassed with a simple flick of his wrist. Had they all become so skilled in Psynergy, that even man-made obstacles became nothing more than slight distractions?

He supposed they had. By the end of their journey, he had seen Jenna melt through solid steel, her flames burning so hot that none could even approach her. Sheba had saved them countless times from Mars Lighthouse's traps by creating a vortex so powerful it scattered even the thickest of flames. Even he... He had frozen *oceans*, the great tides of never-ending motion that had not even frozen in the ancient age of ice, where snow and frost covered all of Weyard, from Prox to Tundaria.

When he thought about it like that, what could really stop them?

Certainly not the small group of men that met them when they entered the central spire.

The three stopped as the men drew their weapons, spreading themselves out. Behind them, a great sandfall sent a dusty plume into the air, thickening in their throats. Piers looked through them briefly. "Where's Virote?"

Silence, save for the constant pouring of sand.

"I see," he said. "He left you to fight while he ran to hide atop the tower, and yet you still protect him. Had he shown such loyalty to me, none of us would be in this situation right now."

"Go," Felix said, stepping forward with Hama. "We can take care of them. You go for Virote, before he can find a way to escape. We'll be there shortly."

Piers nodded, walking towards the group, but they tightened again, blocking his path to the sandfall. "Allow me. Close your eyes." Hama did the same as she stepped past him, waving her hand. A sharp wind picked up inside the chamber, swirling around them. It grabbed the sand from the sandfall easily, and once Felix recognized her intent, he pulled more into the cyclone.

Sand stung at his eyes before Piers remembered to shut them, but in his last seconds of vision, he realized Hama's plan: each of the pirates had covered their eyes, as well. "Where's the path?" he asked, his voice barely audible over the howling sandstorm. He immediately regretted opening his mouth, though, sand coating the inside of it quickly. Hama's control was not *that* fine.

A gentle breeze pushed on his back, prompting him forward. He felt sand smoothing out the cracks beneath his feet, giving him a flat ground to walk on. Following the prompting, he felt the breeze turn a few times, turning him to the side, but very shortly he found himself on a distinctly softer ground – the base of the sandfall.

He paused there, waiting patiently. After a few seconds, the sand below his feet rippled, then pushed up. The sandfall reversed direction, defying gravity to flow upwards and carry Piers with it. As he moved up, he felt the wind lessen, along with the stinging sand on his face. Eventually, he chanced opening his eyes, hoping the sandstorm had been kept low. Sure enough, when he looked down, he could see nothing more than a swirling, brown cloud.

Reaching the top, he stepped out of the sand onto a solid floor of stone. Pausing briefly, he turned back to the ledge, looked down, and saluted, knowing that Felix would have no trouble seeing through the sandstorm. When no visible response came, Piers turned around and climbed the short staircase that led outside.

The evening sun fell on him as he stepped outside, throwing his shadow across the cracked bricks of the tiered pillar. The stones, normally a dull yellow, burned a fierce red in the light of the sunset. Piers briefly took in the surroundings, marveling at how different they looked from at night. He allowed himself only a moment to admire the sight, though; his purpose here took precedence.

He slowly stepped around the pillar, eyes scanning the roof carefully. The places one could hide up here numbered few, but a single oversight could easily see him on a very rapid descent from the tower. He moved quietly, more to hear

others than prevent being heard himself, but the high altitude's strong wind concealed any noise.

In the end, though, his precautions turned out to be unnecessary. Virote sat atop the tiny stone coffer that once guarded a piece of the weapon he held across his lap. He looked down at Piers from his perch, brushing aside the hair that tossed about in the wind. "Hello, Piers."

Piers nodded briefly. "Virote." He crossed his arms as he returned the man's impassive gaze. "I believe you have something that belongs to me."

Virote waved his hand negligently. "I know you've already retaken the *Kailani.* Keep it."

"That was not what I spoke of."

The wind howled around them for a few moments, the only sound that could be heard. Even the waves crashing on the cliffs failed to reach their ears at this height.

Eventually, Virote lifted the Trident with one hand, inspecting the prongs at its tip. Sunlight glinted off the metal like sparks, as if the gods themselves were sharpening the weapon in preparation. "This never belonged to you, Piers. Not really. You were only allowed to borrow its power."

"That may be so, Virote," Piers said, "but if so, then what I have borrowed, you have stolen."

Virote shook his head. "Not stolen. Returned. Do you know the history of this weapon, Piers?"

"I've heard the legends. More importantly, I know the power."

"Both are rooted in the truth," Virote said. "Before Alchemy's seal, children of the gods walked upon Weyard – the demigods. I've heard you met one of the few surviving ones, Poseidon. In the old days, Poseidon led the armies of the Mercury Clan of Lemuria in battle, devastating his enemies with his favored trident. Few could stand against him in battle and win, including other demigods."

"I've heard all this," Piers said. "And when he was defeated, his trident was shattered, and he imprisoned beneath the sea. What is your point?"

Virote waved a finger at him. "Not quite. Poseidon began to grow mad with power. He believed himself invulnerable, forgetting himself to be mortal and claiming godhood. The Ankohl, locked in battle with the demigod's armies, asked for assistance in defeating him.

"Hades, apprentice to Daedalus and Poseidon's brother, answered their call. Together with Zeus, the third brother and apprentice to Thor, they stole Poseidon's trident, enraging him further. Seeing that their brother had been driven insane with his furious blood lust, they worked for a full day and night in Ankohl's Great Forge, turning the trident into a weapon that could defeat their brother.

"As I know you've learned, they succeeded. Imbued with Hades' craftsmanship and Zeus' thunder, Poseidon was struck down. Unable to watch their brother die, however, the two pleaded with their brother's master, Neptune, and had him sealed beneath the waves in an eternal prison, so that the world could escape the wrath of his madness. The Trident, however, proved to be far too effective – it destroyed everything that moved on the seas. Lemuria, losing quickly in the newly turned war, shattered the Trident and took the pieces. At some point, the Ankohl managed to steal back

one piece of their legendary weapon, but apparently Alchemy was sealed before they could reforge it."

Virote fell silent as Piers mulled over the story. Had the man made it up? Possibly, but who could tell? There were a hundred stories about the Trident, with Poseidon being the only element common to all of them. "What point are you trying to make, Virote?" Piers asked after a short while. "That the Trident should be returned here, to the Ankohl? Is that why you came here?"

Shaking his head, Virote said, "This wasn't intentional. The hurricane forced us ashore, so we took up residence here until we could free the ship. The dead have no use for the Trident, after all." He stood up, shifting the Trident to his side. "No, the Trident belongs to me, as one of the few living descendants of the Ankohl. It is *my* heritage."

"I see..." Piers said slowly. "So what is your sudden interest in it, then? You've never been one for power, Virote. You seemed perfectly willing to turn over the *Kailani* now that you have the Trident, but judging by how you've been with it this whole time, I'd say you just received a newfound attraction to the Trident. Why is that?"

"I've heard the rumors about Anemos from Champa, Piers." Virote hopped down a level, the Trident's handle ringing against the stone. "We need to be able to stand against them."

Piers continued to watch him as he slowly approached the second landing, then began to laugh quietly. "You intend to use the weapon that rules the sea against people of the sky? What good will that do you?"

Landing on the same level as Piers, Virote stood up straight and shrugged. "Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. I have a

better chance with the Trident than without it."

"And I have a better chance than you at all," Piers said in a calm tone. "I am far more experienced in Psynergy, battle, and accomplishing the impossible. You will turn over the Trident to me, Virote, or I will be forced to take it from you."

Virote smiled. "Well, then we'll see who'll be more useful, then." As he raised the Trident, the prongs began to crackle with purple electricity, bolts crawling around the metal like ants.

Immediately Piers regretted not having brought a weapon aside from his dagger. In times of need, he had used ice to forge temporary blades, but they could never stand up to the impact a block needed to withstand. With no convenient source of water here, he would need to draw everything from the air. Luckily, Virote had retreated to the most open area of the tower – had he chosen one of the cramped hallways to make his stand, even air moisture would have been difficult to make use of.

As Virote continued to try and intimidate him with the Trident, Piers held out his hands to the side, calmly and methodically drawing in the water from the air. Once condensed, it would be far easier to work with, and he could always call it back to him. Droplets began to form on his hands, merging into small pools as they rippled and flowed into his palms.

"Not much water, is there, Piers?" Virote taunted. "Why do you think I came here? The ocean is too far for you to use. I, however, don't need anything." Holding the Trident upright at his side, Virote held out his other hand at the sailor, flames converging in his palm, then blasting at Piers.

Pulling together all of the water he had gathered and giving an extra burst to instantly condense the moisture around him, Piers held out his hands to receive the fire with a shimmering shield of water. Steam erupted immediately as most of the water flashed, but Piers quickly took hold of it, beginning to condense it again gradually, allowing time to conserve his power.

As another salty gust washed over the tower, Piers realized time would actually win this fight for him. The breeze replaced the parched air with fresh, humid air, full of moisture for him to steal. So long as he continued to gather the water, his resources would only grow. Eventually, he could turn the tower's peak into an airborne lake, if he desired.

The trick would be making it that far, he realized. Virote's Mars Psynergy posed no threat; far more dangerous Mars Adepts had tried their hands against him and failed. The Trident, however, would obliterate any Mercury Psynergy effortlessly, and he had little room to evade such strikes. His only choice, then, would be to prevent it from being used against him at all.

Globules of water forming around him, Piers dashed towards Virote. The thief quickly brought the Trident to bear, lightning blasting from its prongs, but Piers moved the water in front of him, gathering and freezing it into small chunks of ice that he held suspended. He jumped up onto his midair footholds, pushing off and leaping over the deadly Jupiter energy that streamed below, obliterating his ice. For the first time, Piers experienced the odd sensation of feeling the ice nearby instantly sublimate to vapor.

As Virote pulled back on the Trident, swinging it up to strike the airborne man, Piers' foot snapped out, planting his boot

on the handle just below the head. His momentum forced the weapon back down as he landed, though the positioning presented him from striking at Virote on the way.

Spinning around as he stepped back, Virote swung the glowing Trident's head back at Piers, but the sailor followed him, staying on the inside of the Trident's reach. He shunted the weapon aside with his arm, then slammed his open palm into Virote's face. The man's head reared back instantly, his nose spraying blood, but he maintained his composure and snapped the end of the Trident's handle out, smashing it into the side of Piers' head.

The Mercury Adept's vision exploded in a burst of white light as he reflexively stepped back, but he quickly felt the metal rod hook behind his ankle, sweeping it out from under him easily. The world and his stomach spun as he fell to the stones flat on his back, the air rushing from his lungs.

His sight returned in time to see Virote angle the Trident down at him. "Looks like your Psynergy is pretty useless right now."

As the prongs began to spark once more, Piers smiled, but lacked the breath to say anything in response. Instead, behind Virote, water formed around the end of the Trident's handle, freezing into a pommel of sorts. Jerking the ice down telekinetically, the Trident's head swung up as it unleashed another searing bolt of lightning, launching off into the sky.

Virote's momentary confusion gave Piers the time he needed to swing his leg into the other man's leg. In the same moment, he gathered all of the water he had condensed together, slamming the stream into Virote's chest. The opposing forces quickly brought the fight to the ground, as

Piers immediately jumped on the downed man, grabbing hold of the Trident's handle.

They rolled along the roof, struggling with each other for control. Their feet and hands occupied, knees became the weapon of choice, slamming into shins and hips as they both searched for that key area that would secure victory.

Piers found it first.

Virote's eyes opened wide and his grip loosened as his whole body curled slightly, automatically moving to protect his injury. With a strong jerk, Piers wrenched the Trident from the man's hands, pushing himself up and adopting the same stance Virote had only moments before.

"So," Piers said softly, his tone giving no indication of the battle rage that still lingered from the close call, "what should I do with you, Virote? How do I settle with a man who was willing to kill in order to keep this Trident? A man who began this whole struggle by betraying the captain whom he had sworn to serve? They call that mutiny. But the treacheries don't end with that, do they? You betrayed the will of your sworn leader, Briggs, and returned to piracy. They call that one treason, Virote."

Virote stared up at Piers from the ground. "Do you want me to plead for my life, Piers? I will not. Had our roles been reversed, I would have already killed you."

"I'm aware of that," Piers said. "I am sure you haven't forgotten, but our roles *were* reversed not long ago. I felt the deadly energy as it barely missed me. Had I not interrupted it, I would now be nothing more than dust."

He let the words hang in the air for a while, only the sound of the howling wind preventing the tower from falling into

complete silence. The head of the Trident still crackled ominously and water still materialized around Piers in tiny bubbles, his continuous condensing having been successfully delegated to his subconscious.

The longer he waited, however, the more he felt his well-controlled anger fade. Felix's words echoed in his head repeatedly, catalyzing his soothing. With an almost silent sigh, Piers stepped back, standing the Trident at his side. Circling around Virote, he moved to the stairway leading back inside the tower, then turned around.

He leaned the Trident against the stone wall and reached down, unhooking a canteen from his pocket. After taking a long drink from it, he drew the bubbles still floating around the rooftop into the canteen, filling it with the fresh water. Once he finished, he capped it again, then tossed it at Virote. The metal container clattered onto the stones next to the man's prone form.

"A gift," Piers said, grabbing the Trident once more. "Your life is in your own hands now. I leave you to make of it what you will."

"You're leaving me here?" Virote asked, propping himself up onto an elbow. "Why?"

"I won't kill you, Virote. I'm not that kind of person." Piers turned to the doorway, then looked over his shoulder. "But we'll be taking your men with us, and I doubt your Mars Psynergy will help you descend that sandfall. If you ration the water, I'd estimate you have approximately a week to find your way down. I'd make use of it."

No sound followed him as he stepped through the doorway.

"So this is the great Lemuria," Alex said softly, looking around as they emerged from the docks. "I must admit, I find it a bit...underwhelming."

Slender tendrils of mist reached in from the sea, stretching as far inland as they could before dissipating. They swirled through the unkempt grass and ancient trees, up the cliffs and into their many cracks. On the lower portions of the island, near the water, grass and ivy had completely overrun the various stone structures that lingered on, resisting the pull of time. In these the mist settled deeply, swirling about the ground like the dunes of a desert.

"Yeah, you're looking at the abandoned parts," Jenna said. "The part of the city that they still use is up ahead, but honestly, it's not much better. The only difference is there's people there."

"There's someone down there, too," Ivan said, gesturing down the hill into the ruinous lower city. Jenna followed his gaze and saw a green-haired man sitting atop one of the fallen stone pillars, looking out over the ocean.

"Huh. That's interesting," she said, then turned away. "What do you think, Isaac?"

The Venus Adept frowned, looking down the hill also, then looked up the stairs to the city proper. "We could talk to him, find out what he's doing, and work from there."

"I must disagree, Isaac," Alex said quietly. "If he has already been refused entry, then it will make our own more difficult. If not, then we must question why he waits. Better for us to make haste to the king, turn the information over to him, and let him decide."

Jenna turned her gaze over to Ivan, who frowned, but said, "I agree. Getting to the king is the priority. Besides, maybe he *actually* got lost here during the hurricane."

Isaac looked at her next, so she simply nodded in agreement rather than saying anything. He nodded in return, then said, "Alright, then let's keep going."

Jenna took a step up the hill, then paused, groaned, and turned back towards the stairs they had already climbed. "Come on, guys! You're taking forever!"

"Yeah, well, the rear guard can't move any faster than the slowest people," Garet's voice drifted up.

"Not all of us run up and down stairs every day for training, Garet," Mia's voice said next.

Jenna heard a barely audible, "Well, maybe you shou- ow ow ow!" Amidst the shouts of pain, Mia emerged through the doorway, dragging a hunched-over Garet by his hair. Sheba walked in front of them, obviously enjoying the show.

"Are you finished with the sass?" Mia asked, curling her fingers slightly to pull up on his hair a bit more.

Garet winced and waved his hands. "Yes! Yes, I'm done! I'm sorry!"

Mia nodded, then released her grip, turning and walking towards the rest of the group. Sheba bent over by Garet and poked him in the stomach twice. "Heh heh."

His hand snatched out to grab her, but the girl had already danced away, laughing. "Muzzle yourself, melon head."

"Careful, spikes, or I'll get Mia to discipline you again."

Mia rolled her eyes as she caught up to Jenna and the others. "Can we leave them here? Please?"

Grinning, Isaac said, "You sound like you missed playing mother."

She buried her face into her hands. "It's not even been ten minutes and I already have a headache. This teleportation sickness isn't helping matters, either. I don't know how you deal with it so well."

Jenna's mouth split into a grin that mirrored Isaac's. "After all the times I've pushed it too far, the regular nausea's no problem. Now come on, let's go. The gate's right ahead." She resumed walking, taking in the sights of Lemuria once again. None of them had been back since they left, and while Jenna would never want to live there, she found the city had a certain charm, one achieved by its peace and inherently unhurried nature.

The guards saw them well before they reached the gate, which had apparently been relocated from the docks since their last visit. Jenna found herself wondering why an island that received almost no visitors even bothered to station guards, then remembered they held a different view on time. What could possibly be a waste of time if you for so long?

"Halt," one of them called atop the stairs. "This is Lemuria, domain of the good King Hydros. What business do you have here?"

"We're here to speak to the king," Jenna said, stepping forward.

The other guard's mouth opened, but he stopped himself before he could speak. He closed his mouth again, looking at Jenna, then elbowed the other guard and pointed to Sheba.

Jenna cleared her throat, causing both guards to look at each other. "I am afraid we have orders to keep you out, Miss Brooke and Miss Kamari."

Sheba frowned. "Are you serious? Why?"

"The senate has imposed an exile of you two, alongside your brother and Piers," he said. "Our rules are clear: if you leave Lemuria, you are not permitted to return."

Jenna opened her mouth to argue more, but Alex placed a hand on her shoulder. "If they cannot enter, what about the rest of us? We have never been to Lemuria, therefore we have never been exiled from it."

The other guard shook his head. "I will not permit you entry until I can confirm the King's wishes. Your friends have all violated our laws already, and I have no doubt you intend to do the same."

Alex sighed. "I was afraid you would say that." He raised a hand to them, but a much larger one knocked it down.

"What do you think you're doing?" Garet asked, glaring at Alex.

The blue-haired man stared back at him. "I'm getting us inside Lemuria, as is King Hydros' intent. We don't exactly have time to wait around for them to inform us of what we already know."

"Yeah, well you can't just attack them!"

Alex sighed. "I understand your qualms, Garet. Believe me, I do. I have no intention of harming either of these gentlemen. They are merely doing their jobs, after all. I just need to...move them aside."

Garet shook his head, moving in front of Alex. "So you just want to muscle your way in and completely ignore their rules? That's not how we do things, Alex."

Shrugging, Alex said, "If that's how you want it, then I shall defer to you. I was merely interested in speeding along what will likely be a very lengthy process."

Jenna frowned at the exchange, then turned to Isaac. "As much as I hate to agree with him," she said quietly, so that no one else could hear, "he's got a point. We can't wait around for them to simply let us in. Even last time, we had to convince them that we wouldn't do anything."

"But how can we do that this time?" he asked. "You're outright forbidden, and they've got a pretty good case against the rest of us. Especially since, you know, it's completely true."

"Yeah..." Jenna looked down, thinking. Attacking the guards would be a terrible idea, and not one she was comfortable with, at any rate. Sneaking everyone past them would be impossible, now that they had made themselves known. She looked back up to find Isaac staring at her thoughtfully. "What is it?"

"Nothing, just...thinking." His eyes swung up past her, glancing around them. She turned also, wondering what he was looking for, but the only things she could see were the stone steps, the stone gate, a lot of grass, and a lone tree.

Isaac's eyes locked on the tree and it shook once, a few leaves falling to the ground silently. After a few seconds it shook again, this time more violently. By now, the others had noticed it, as had the guards. Without any further warning, the roots of the tree suddenly burst from the ground,

throwing earth everywhere as they snaked through the air at the guards.

In a single motion, Isaac drew his sword with both hands and slashed down, cleaving through the incoming roots with ease. As another one approached, he batted it away with his blade, turning towards the others that had fallen still. "Burn it!" he shouted.

Jenna stared at him in confusion. What was he doing? She could feel Psynergy emanating from him in a constant wave, but it seemed to be...suppressed? By who?

"Burn it!" Isaac shouted again, and this time, Garet obeyed. Raising his hand as he dashed towards the tree, roots erupting from the ground around him, he pulled his fist back. Jenna could almost see the invisible funnel of Psynergy spiraling into him as he drew in energy directly from the sun overhead. He planted his foot to stop his body, leaned forward to continue his arm's momentum, and slammed his fist into the trunk of the tree.

The explosion forced Jenna to shield her eyes as she stepped back from the concussive wave, pieces of bark pelting her. When the noise finally died down, it left her ears ringing slightly, completely unaffected by the wiggling of her fingers around in them for a moment.

Only a husk remained of the tree. Every leaf had been blown free by the explosion, stripping the branches bare and shattering some of the smaller ones. Where Garet's fist had landed, the tree had burst outward, leaving a gaping mouth in the trunk. It teetered there slightly before another subtle pulse of Psynergy moved past her, loosening the ground and allowing the tree to fall down the cliff, where the ocean would claim it.

Glancing back, she saw Isaac discreetly remove the tip of his sword from where it had pierced the soil, sliding it back into the sheath on his back as he walked to the guards. "*That* is why we need to get to the king," Isaac said breathlessly, pointing back at the tree. "The same people that caused your hurricane are doing that, among other things. We need to talk to him about that, but if we wait around, it'll be too late."

The guards looked at each other briefly, then stepped to one side. "Very well," one said. "But...please, do not aggravate our citizens. I ask that you present yourself to His Majesty as soon as he is available."

"Don't worry," she said as she passed. "We're here to fix problems, not cause them."

The other guard snorted. "The last time you came to fix a problem, half of Lemuria wound up accusing the king of treason."

"Oh..." Jenna winced. "Well, in that case, I really don't want to promise anything this time. Sorry." She continued on, Isaac shaking his head behind her.

"I must admit," Alex said after they had left the guards behind, "your solution was quite impressive, Isaac. "

"Yeah," Garet snapped. "Thanks for letting us know what the hell was going on."

Jenna snorted as Isaac shrugged in response. Apparently, Garet had actually believed the tree was attacking. "I didn't exactly have time to let you know," Isaac said. "I was busy enough trying to control it, while also hiding my Psynergy from them. If they had realized I was using it, or that wind

and plants don't fall under the same elemental control, it wouldn't have worked."

"They probably haven't seen anything other than Mercury Psynergy in their whole lives," Sheba said quietly. "They don't remember how the other elements break down, other than the very basics, most likely."

As they entered the city proper, Jenna paused, allowing everyone besides herself and Sheba to gawk. As she waited for them to finish, she looked around also, thinking about the other places they had seen. Sure, many of the modern towns were impressive in their own ways, like Tolbi sprawling size, or Champa's unique placement, but none of them held the same grandeur that the enormous buildings of Lemuria emanated. The only places that evoked the same emotions in her were the other ancient structures: the lighthouses and towers of old.

This despite all of them falling into disrepair with Alchemy's seal, too. She had often wondered what Lemuria would have looked like in the past, during its prime. Would Anemos look like that? Would their separation from Weyard have protected them from the atrophying effects that plagued the rest of the world, or would it simply have amplified them?

"So," Isaac said, snapping out of his survey, "where to now?"

Jenna tapped her chin briefly, then said, "Lunpa. He can get us through any more trouble easily."

Isaac motioned for her to lead the way, so she stepped by him and gestured for the others to follow. As they walked, she began to wonder if she would ever even see Anemos. So far, all of their plans had simply been to fight the Anemoi, but there had been no talk of any details yet. None of them

had even spoke of other interactions with them; in the face of Tolbi, talk of much else seemed pointless.

But how would you go about trying to stop an entire city of powerful Adepts? Kill them all? Even if Jenna believed such a counter-genocide were a good idea, how could they even go about it? They were a handful of people, potentially facing up to an entire army. The only way for them to even consider victory would be to wipe out a large portion of the Anemoi in a single blow...like the ones they had struck first with.

Jenna frowned. There had to be some other way. Atrocities were often committed in the name of the greater good during war times, she knew, but the only way to prevent an endless cycle of violence would be to avoid such atrocities. Every time the thought crossed her mind, she thought back to Alchemy's seal, and how it had been created in order to stop wars. Had unleashing Alchemy really done nothing more than begin the cycle anew?

"Jenna..."

The young woman glanced over her shoulder at Ivan, finding an even deeper frown on his face. Once he caught her eyes, he glanced to the side. "Look."

She did as he said, finding the green-haired man from earlier walking up the stairs to the palace. As the others stopped to look also, a sudden gasp from Mia turned their heads back to her. Her hand covered her mouth as she looked at the man with wide eyes. "That's impossible... I saw that man this morning in Tolbi!"

"The only way to cover that sort of distance in such a short time is by teleportation," Alex said quickly. "Teleportation is ruled by Jupiter, making that man a Jupiter Adept...a

powerful one." His implication raced up Jenna's spine in an icy wave, standing her hair on edge.

"Anemos," Ivan whispered.

Isaac immediately bolted after the man. "Isaac, wait!" Mia shouted, then growled in frustration. "Garet, you are a terrible influence on him!" Casting the confused Mars Adept an annoyed glance, she took off after Isaac.

"I think Isaac's got the right idea," Jenna said, walking quickly in the same direction. "I don't like this." She sped up to a trot for a few moments, before settling into a steady run. She could hear the others following suit behind her, but Isaac had quite a lead, the Anemian an even greater one.

As she turned the corner, she could see Isaac just reaching the bottom of the stairs, while the Anemian had just vanished behind the main doors. Abandoning any pretense now, she pumped her legs as fast as they could move, overtaking Mia easily. Her sword rattled at her side, where she had earlier found it needlessly cumbersome.

Reaching the stairs, she jumped them three at a time, bounding upwards so fast that she feared if she stopped to think about her foot's next position, she would misstep and smash her face into the stone. Isaac's lead had lessened, though he now reached the door also, throwing it open and disappearing inside.

She realized now that several Lemurians had stopped to watch them and she suppressed a smile, despite her other thoughts. This had probably been the most interesting thing any of them had seen this year.

Though the door had nearly closed by the time she reached it, she wasted no time in stopping to open it, instead

barreling through it, shoulder first. Inside, she found several surprised Lemurians, Isaac standing at the base of the great decorative fountain, looking up, and the Anemian vanishing into the doorway above. How had he reached it so quickly? Had he simply jumped?

Isaac glanced back at her, then took off again up the more mundane path of stairs. Jenna did not stop, taking the opposite side, feeling the adrenaline finally reaching her muscles and propelling her forward. She reached the upper level at the same time as Isaac, their eyes meeting briefly before they turned down the hallway, jogging to the throne room.

The Anemian had already reached it, standing across the wide chamber from King Hydros, who had a confused expression on his face. "Who are you?" he asked, his voice carrying easily throughout the empty hall, only four metal statues and a tiled floor between the two men.

Jenna slowed and stopped some distance away from the green-haired man, holding out her arm to stop Isaac as well. The pattering behind her told her that the others had reached the throne room as well, though they followed suit and stopped.

The man had begun slowly stepping forward as he spoke, paying no attention to the new arrivals, nor even indicating if he knew they had come. "Greetings, Lemurian King. To your magnificence I present myself, Clotho Lycoris, King of Anemos."

Hydros stared at the man for a moment, his eyes not so much as flickering to the others. Jenna turned and silently made motions for the others to spread out in a semicircle behind the Anemian, herself and Isaac moving into his line

of sight. Clotho continued to ignore their presence, however, his eyes solely for the Lemurian King.

As she moved she caught her first glimpses of the man and found herself surprised at how young he looked. He could not have been older than Felix! How could he be the King of Anemos?

Hydros stayed silent for a long moment, till finally his brow uncreased, though his gaze remained locked. "Welcome to my kingdom, King Clotho Lycoris. I had difficulty recognizing you."

Clotho's eyebrows rose. "Oh? I don't recall us ever meeting, Your Highness."

"No? You were but a child. You came with your father, the Fulminous King."

The Anemian shook his head, whipping around both his loose hair and the green braid that fell to the middle of his back. "Were you king then, as well? I hope you forgive me, Your Highness, but I have only distant and vague memories of my last visit."

Hydros waved a hand negligently, his unblinking eyes still fixed on the man as steadily as the frown on his face. "I have heard some troubling news concerning Anemos of late," the king said slowly.

"Have you?" Clotho tilted his head slightly. "What did you hear?"

Standing up, Hydros said, "That you have attacked not just Lemuria, but all of Weyard upon your return."

"Absurd," Clotho said immediately. "We picked our targets very carefully."

A great roar filled the throne room as Hydros whipped his arms back. Jenna tore her eyes away from the calm Anemian, finding streams of water flowing from the entrance hall and winding through the air like ribbons. They coursed through the air, winding around each of her friends so close that she could see the bubbles entrained in the fluid, giving it a silvery hue and making it look like the mythical liquid metal itself.

The rivers arced sharply as they passed Clotho, turning and converging on the man as Hydros slung his arms forward, water loosing from the sleeves of his royal robes and joining the torrent. The massive stream slammed into the Anemian King and picked him up effortlessly, carrying him in one motion back to the entrance hall.

Before Jenna could even consider following, Hydros slid by her at incredible speed, the remnants of the water freezing beneath his feet and melting in his wake before flowing into the air to follow him. She shared a brief look of amazement with Sheba, then followed. All around them, drops of water rose from the floor and walls, flitting past them like a swarm of insects.

By the time she reached the base of the fountain, Jenna found Clotho standing in the doorway, apparently unharmed. Hydros stood opposite him, his face contorted in an anger she thought the ancient king incapable of. "You attack my kingdom in an unprovoked act of war, and then have the audacity to walk into my palace, Lycoris?"

Clotho shrugged. "I had thought our attack had been hasty and wished to extend an offering of peace, but I see that-"

"Spare me your lies!" Hydros shouted. "Your sole intention was to assess your damage and our strength...and possibly to assassinate me!"

The Anemian continued to stare at him from across the entrance hall impassively. Out of the corner of her eye, Jenna saw Garet move to draw his sword, but the slightest shake of Hydros' head convinced him to leave it sheathed and step back.

"So you wish it to be a warrior's death, then..." Clotho said softly, but it carried; the only sound to hide it was the gentle lapping of water in the fountain. "I've never understood such sentiments. A death is a death. Why bother making the manner a pointless struggle? But if you so insist, Hydros, I suppose I can entertain you in this. You seem to be the last of Weyard's kings, so I imagine our history books will enjoy a chapter about the King of the Mists' defeat at the hands of the Luminous King."

Chapter 7: The Greater Good

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 7 – The Greater Good

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Jaws snapped shut where Ivan had been only moments before, saliva spraying all over him as the mouth reopened in a terrifying roar. The monster strained its neck out, but with the body commandeered by the remaining two heads, the boy remained mere feet away from those rows of razor teeth.

"*Don't be so close, Ivan!" Jenna shouted, grabbing his arm and pulling him back. Garet moved in, swinging his enormous blade at the draconian head, but it withdrew quickly, one of the other heads moving its focus from Felix to Garet. Both heads reared back, opening their mouths as Mars Psynergy pooled from the lighthouse beneath them, drawn in by the dragon.*

As both mouths simultaneously released brilliant red breams of pure Mars energy, Isaac slid to a stop beside Garet, raising his sword. The beams smashed into the stone of the lighthouse as it instantly shifted up, a horrible cracking sound echoing across the aerie.

"*Felix, Piers, watch out!" Ivan shouted as the dragon turned all three heads towards the two men opposite them, but when the heads continued past them, he realized he had misread the dragon's intent. Its tail smashed into Isaac's stone barrier, the bone tip whipped into it like a steel flail.*

Stones, swords, and bodies flew across the aerie, thankfully sliding to a halt before dropping off the edge.

As Mia practically flew to their two friends, Ivan saw Piers raise his hand as ice formed around the hard head of the tail. The dragon stumbled in its turn, off-balance from the sudden weight change, and Ivan saw one of its massive claws flail out and catch Sheba as she tried to back away. The girl collapsed to the ground, still moving, but now in the path of the enormous dragon as it tried to move forward to regain balance.

Wasting no time, Ivan dashed forward, pointing along the ground furiously to Piers. The man understood and the stones in Ivan's path glistened, then shimmered as a thin layer of ice covered them. Taking an enormous leap and propelling himself faster with a backward burst of wind, Ivan landed on the ice on his knees in a fast slide.

As he passed beneath the dragon's massive body, he leaned back as far as he could, raising his sword to trail the thin tip along the dragon's scales. Purple lightning sparked along the blade, then transferred directly to the relatively unprotected stomach above. All three mouths opened at once, roaring out in pain, but the powerful burst of lightning seized it momentarily. Ivan strained to hold it as Felix helped Sheba back to her feet and out of the way, but as he passed back out from underneath the dragon, the contact broke.

Instantly the dragon's movement returned, but in its attempts to force freedom, the sudden movement sent it sprawling further than it likely expected. After three great, crashing steps, the edge of the aerie arrived and the darkness beyond swallowed the dragon whole.

Ivan sighed from his position on the ground, leaning back, until the sound of rushing air made him leap back to his feet.

The sound of flapping wings.

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"But if you so insist, Hydros, I suppose I can entertain you in this. You seem to be the last of Weyard's kings, so I imagine our history books will enjoy a chapter about the King of the Mists' defeat at the hands of the Luminous King."

As Mia watched incredulously, the palace's streams, normally flowing through either side of the entrance hall, snapped out suddenly, reaching for Clotho with great, rippling fingers. The Anemian made no motion save spreading his hands to the side, as if unwilling to fight back, keeping his eyes locked with Hydros. The furious rapids pounded towards him, then suddenly curved to his sides, pooling in the air beside him and forming a pair of growing globes.

Clotho smiled at him, but Hydros gave the man no response. Instead, a sharp cracking filled the air as the streams suddenly solidified, turning into bars of ice. At their ends, the spherical pools simultaneously burst and froze, transforming into shimmering, multi-pointed stars, but Clotho had not remained between them to be impaled by the icy spikes.

Dashing towards Hydros, he extended his hands to his sides and ran them across the ice, generating an incredibly high-pitched whistle as he moved. Mia scrunched up her face in irritation at the almost undetectable sound, but her eyes widened once more when the ice suddenly shattered, a ripple of frozen shards moving faster than Clotho.

Before the Anemian could reach the Lemurian, though, Hydros suddenly vanished, the bars of shattered ice falling to the ground and instantly melting again while the stars teetered precariously on their slender spikes. Clotho turned his feet sideways, sliding on the wet floor until he stopped, not so much as glancing at any of them on or around the stairs, but turning back around immediately.

Hydros and he had switched positions, the King of the Mists now standing in the doorway – a warp, Mia realized. He flicked his arms out and streams of water reconnected to the frozen crystals, tendrils of water wrapping around them. With a snap of his arm, the ice pulled back as if tethered to a great flail, then slammed forward, sending splintered ice everywhere.

Clotho sidestepped the great chunk of ice, ignoring the ice fragments, then reached out and shoved his hand into the whip of water that held it. A loud noise cracked through the air as his hand suddenly flashed purple, lightning streaming from his fingers. Mia's eyes widened immediately – Ivan had shown her the way water spread the effect of lightning to anyone touching it. Her expression, as well as Clotho's, quickly turned to one of confusion, though, as the lightning did nothing more than burst through the water and crash into the wall.

The water around his hand suddenly froze again, ensnaring it as Hydros pulled back his other arm, then sent the second chunk of ice flying at Clotho. For one wild moment, Mia thought the Anemian would be crushed between the two great, frozen crystals, but a flash of white light saw him free from his binding, a powerful burst of wind shoving him away. The chunks of ice smashed into each other, but immediately swung apart, Hydros noticing his opponent's evasion.

Both crystals began to fly in perpetual motion, swinging in what appeared to Mia to be a completely wild fashion, though she realized after a moment that the swings were calculated; only one ever lodged itself into the ground at a time, with both usually swinging consecutively. It created a moving wall of ice, a deadly storm that forced Clotho backwards continuously, pushing him towards the stairs once more. Mia looked down, suddenly nervous for Jenna and Garet, but found they had moved towards the hallways.

Clotho, apparently realizing he had quickly run out of room for retreating, turned himself sideways, pulling both hands back. As the Lemurian King swung his Psynergetic flail forward once more, snapping it forward directly at Clotho, the Anemian reached out a single hand as if to catch it. Before it could touch him, though, his hand flashed white. Mia reflexively winced away from the bright light, but immediately looked back, forcing herself to remain watching.

She was rewarded with a sudden, fierce explosion that pelted her with tiny pieces of ice. The white light had obliterated the chunk of ice completely, now traveling forward through the straight run of water. As it moved, the water instantly vaporized, a plume of steam trailing the light as it struck Hydros in the chest.

The old man flew backwards as if thrown by an explosion, spinning out of the palace and down the stairs. Mia heard Isaac call out in alarm, but as Clotho stepped forward through the entrance hall to follow, Hydros vanished again. Clotho stopped suddenly, then turned around to find Hydros standing at the base of the stairs once again, right back where they had started, though the old king's chest bore a great burn mark. His slightly hunched posture told Mia that he felt the blow far more than his expression let on.

Hydros reached out with a tendril of water for his remaining crystal, the spikes now nothing more than stubs, but Clotho's hand snapped out as he did. Another white bolt that did not quite look like lightning snapped out, shattering the chunk with ease and leaving a black scorch mark on the cracked stone tile.

Clotho smiled, then raised his hand to Hydros. At the last second, the Lemurian raised his own, and when the next white bolt should have struck him, his hand seemingly batted it back at its owner. Clotho leaned to the side rather wildly to avoid it, almost losing his balance to let the Psynergy fly out the door and into the sky. Clotho watched it go for a moment, then turned back to Hydros, dashing at the man with one glowing hand pulled back.

Before Mia could so much as blink, though, four new figures suddenly landed in front of Hydros, forcing Clotho to halt his charge prematurely. After a few seconds of watching the Anemian stare at them in confusion, she realized they were actually metal statues, taking up a defensive posture between the two kings. Glancing across, she saw Isaac standing on the other set of stairs, his hand held out. "What's the matter? Your Jupiter Psynergy can't affect metal?" he called down.

Clotho raised an eyebrow, a half-smile emerging on his face as the glow faded from his hand. "Tell me, Venusian, how well do you think you can control and coordinate these statues?"

"Long enough for me to step in." Alex materialized in front of the statues, mere inches away from the Anemian, who stepped back in surprise. "I must say, I'm rather impressed by your manipulation of Jupiter. Vacuums and sound...and

light? Most interesting. You've certainly earned the title of Luminous King."

"Oh? And you are...?"

Alex smiled at the man, wagging his finger. "I need not tell you anything, but rest assured, you will find out one day."

Clotho laughed at that, placing his hands on his hips. "Such temerity! You have the boldness of a king, I will grant you that, worm. Shake the earth from your body and I would not be surprised to find wings underneath."

Without so much as a pause, Clotho's hand flew up, lightning arcing from his fingertips. Almost casually, Alex raised his own hand, brushing the bolts aside to one of the statues. A pair of young Lemurians hesitantly looking around the corner of the side hallway, drawn by the sound of commotion, suddenly ducked back.

Alex shook his head. "You certainly have the overconfidence of a king, Lycoris."

"You're strong," Ivan called out, stepping off of the stairs, "but I don't think you can handle all of us."

Clotho's eyes drifted over to the boy briefly, his mouth opening to respond. As his eyes fell on Ivan, however, the words halted on his tongue. Mia saw worry and confusion flicker over her friend's face momentarily as she stepped onto the ground floor as well, then Clotho shook his head. "I see he was successful in passing on our powers to even the commoners... What a shame. I suppose we'll have to perform another cleansing once we've settled."

"A cleansing?" Ivan asked. "What are you talking about?"

Waving his hand negligently, Clotho said, "Oh, you needn't worry yourself. You're be one of the last to go, at any rate. We can wait until the other clans are dealt with before grooming the feathers of our own."

Ivan's face darkened slightly, though Mia could not tell if it was due to Clotho's dismissal of the subject, or simply the continual killing he referred to. As she watched the boy, Garet caught her eye on his other side. He jerked his head to the side slightly, so she looked around the chamber. Though the sun sat high in the sky, the only source of light in the entrance hall came from the open door and two small windows at the ends of the hallways, casting much of the room in shadow. She looked back at Garet and nodded, stepping to the side. Gently reaching out with her Psynergy, she took hold of the moisture in the air and wrapped it around her like a cloak, refracting the dim light in the shadows away from her.

"Why are you doing this?"

Slightly surprised, Mia glanced over as she silently slipped through the shadows, moving slowly to avoid detection. Sheba stood opposite her on Hydros' other side. The girl slowly stepped forward, carefully keeping her eyes on Clotho, who turned to her with a smile. "Doing what, girl? Bringing about an end to the wars that mankind brings upon itself? Sacrificing a few in the present for the greater good of the future?"

"That's not what you're doing!" she shouted, balling her hands into fists. "You're just murdering a bunch of people because they're different from you!"

Clotho stared at her for a few moments in silence, making Mia uneasy as she moved. Sheba did not seem to notice

through her anger, as she simply returned the gaze, waiting for a response. "...You're not so different, though, are you?" he said at last. "No, you're no lowborn worm. You've the face of a true Anemian."

Sheba shook her head violently as Clotho confirmed what the girl had long suspected. Mia could see minute droplets scattering as her head swung, though her tossing hair masked them well. "No! I want nothing to do with you! My home is here! My friends are here!"

"Friends..." Clotho snorted. "I've never understood the commoners' fascination with such a relationship." He frowned. "Or are you a commoner? To be a pure-blood Anemian outside of Anemos... I wonder if you're..."

"If I'm what?" Sheba practically snarled, her face nearly glowing with a savage expression of hatred. Mia judged the distance between herself and Clotho, then stepped forward, next to the pool of water.

His mouth split into a wide grin. "How did your friend say it? You'll find out one day, dear child. Soon, mayhap. I'll need to-"

To the onlookers in the room, Mia appeared as suddenly as Alex had, water from the stream splashing up before her. The droplets elongated and became hundreds of tiny, frozen needles, then launched themselves at Clotho.

With an almost casual flicker of his hand, a sharp gust of wind scattered the weightless icicles everywhere, shattering many of them with the force alone. Mia stepped back slowly as Clotho looked at her, matching her steps.

She held his gaze, unworried by his silent threat, until she saw a flash of red behind the Anemian King, accompanied

by a great sword, gripped tightly in a pair of hands. In three steps Garet crossed the entrance hall to Clotho, swinging at the man's waist with enough force to wedge the blade halfway through a tree trunk.

Whether Clotho knew of the sneak attack or simply suspected it, Mia had no idea, but either explanation ended with the same result. The Anemian spun to meet Garet, but instead of ducking under the blade or blocking it, Clotho jumped into the air. As he did, great, white, feathered wings unfolded from his back, where Mia had been certain nothing had been before. They flapped once, lifting him high enough to pull his feet over the sword, before landing once more.

Immediately he thrust one hand forward, a blinding flash of light emitting from his palm. To Mia's horror, Garet's body went airborne in the next moment, flying across the hall and crashing into the side wall, before sliding down.

She and Jenna were at his side in a second, bending down to check on him. The man groaned loudly, winced horribly, made a few grunting sounds, and then accepted their help back to his feet. A great scorch mark ringed the rough hole where his clothes had burned away on his chest. His skin had turned a bright red, and after a few test stretches, he discarded his sword.

"Payback time," he muttered, then stepped forward to Clotho, whose wings had vanished once again. Mia shivered suddenly as Garet snap-gathered all the heat around him, then pulled the light itself in a second draw. He raked his glowing hands through the air, as if scraping them across a great flint stone, and an incredible torrent of wild flames spewed forth, enveloping the Anemian.

Or at least, they would have, had he not raised his own hand. Clotho drew the flames in like he had with Hydros' water, funneling them into a tiny point in front of him. As they gathered, so they smothered, leaving a void behind to draw in more flames. In a matter of moments, all of Garet's potent fire had vanished entirely.

Before the flames had fully dispersed, though, his hands were already flying once more, canceling out innumerable blades of pressurized air that flew from Ivan and Sheba. The two alternated their timing, trying to throw the king off-guard, but Clotho held himself strong. Jenna drew her sword and began to pull in some of the leftover energy from Garet's attack, but Clotho suddenly stepped back, towards the entrance.

"You've made your point," he said, holding up his hands. "I'm rather surprised that you're even alive, though," he added, looking at Garet. "Perhaps I've lost some of my skill since we departed."

"Or maybe I'm just that damn good," Garet gasped out.

Clotho frowned. "No, but it makes no difference. I suppose Lemuria shall keep their king for a while longer." He turned towards Hydros, who still stood in front of the fountain. "But rest assured, Your Highness, I will be back for you, and the rest of your kind."

"Who said we're letting you leave?" Jenna said, pointing her blade at the Anemian.

He simply laughed. "Girl, you have no say in that matter. I came prepared for the worst." As a final chuckle echoed through the hall, his body disintegrated into tiny particles and the man vanished.

Jenna let her sword arm drop as the palace fell into silence, before being broken by the sound of Garet vomiting. "Ooo, lunch doesn't look very appetizing any more."

Mia rolled her eyes even as she crouched down, rubbing his back. "Honestly, it never looked that great in the first place, Garet." Sighing as he retched again, she rubbed her own arms while she waited until the sounds to cease, then asked, "How did he teleport so quickly? Did he use a rune to get here, or do you think they have a cure for this?"

Ivan shook his head. "Remember when we got here? He was waiting on the outskirts, out of sight. He'd probably been waiting there for hours so that he could leave if necessary."

"That's good news for us," Alex said, walking over and conjuring a small orb of water for Garet to drink. "It means they're still unable to teleport for at least a couple hours, as well, which means they're also still susceptible to attack immediately after arriving, like- Oh for the gods' sakes, I just fought alongside you, Garet, why would I bother trying to poison you?"

Garet looked up from where he had been warily staring at the water, then returned his gaze to it sheepishly. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Sorry. Old habits." He placed his mouth to the water bubble and sucked in slowly, then backed up and licked his lips. "It tastes a bit weird."

"Pure water," Alex explained. "There are no trace sediments that are naturally found in spring water, since it was condensed from the air. It also doesn't conduct lightning, as you might have noticed during the fight."

"Or it could be your puke. You okay now?" Ivan asked, crouching next to him.

When Garet nodded, Mia did also, standing back up and walking over to the fountain with Jenna, where Isaac, Hydros, and Sheba still stood, finding the returning warmth very welcoming. "What about you? Are all of you alright?"

Hydros nodded wearily. "I appreciate your assistance here. If I had been alone... Well, I should be thankful I was not. You all have the most fortunate timing I have ever seen."

"We just received Lunpa's letter concerning you and Piers," Isaac said.

"Yes, about that..." Hydros glanced over at Garet, who was being shakily helped to his feet by Ivan and Alex, both of them plainly straining with his weight. "I think it would be better to postpone our discussions for a short while."

Jenna looked at him warily. "How long of a 'short while' are we talking about, exactly?"

Shaking his head, his enormous beard swinging from side to side, he said, "One of your short whiles. I have grown accustomed to years of little to no activity, and grow tired quickly. I imagine some of your number wish to rest, as well." He paused, running a hand through his beard to straighten it. "I assume Felix is attending to Piers?"

Isaac nodded. "He's in Champa now, finding him. They'll both be coming here afterward."

"Good," Hydros said. "Then when they arrive, and you all feel ready, come back and speak with my aide. He will retrieve me." He gestured to one of the Lemurians Mia had seen earlier, who had finally left the refuge of the hallway, then bowed his head to them. "Thank you all, once again. I hope our meeting will be productive."

He turned to walk back upstairs, his aide following closely. As they climbed the stairs, she distinctly heard him say, "I'm afraid you'll need to inform Conservato that *our* meeting will need to be rescheduled. I doubt he'll be pleased."

Jenna's face split into a wide grin, despite the situation. "Oh, that fart is gonna be *pissed."*

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Waves pushed at the side of the ship, gently rocking it to port, then swept underneath the hull, pulling it back to starboard as it glided through the water. Spray leaped up as the ship parted an ocean swell, sending the saltwater splattering onto the deck.

With a wave of Piers' hand, the excess water pulled itself from the deck and drifted over the railing, dropping back to the ocean. The exposed steel on the deck would not last under the typical corrosion of saltwater. For most vessels, this led to a constant scrubbing and scouring of the decks, to prevent salt buildup, but for a Lemurian, such tedious work had long since become unnecessary.

The cleaning complete, Piers glanced ahead once more, then to the sides. Finding nothing but open ocean in all directions, he glanced to his right at the setting sun. He estimated its remaining travel until sunset, then grabbed the tiller, adjusting it slightly.

Satisfied with his course, he reached out mentally and touched the Black Orb beneath the deck, slowing his speed slightly. Once dark fell, such high speeds were never a good idea, especially on approach to Lemuria. They should still be at least a day away, but the fractured land that surrounded the island for miles had shredded many a careless ship. Much safer to ensure a daytime approach.

He touched the Hover Jade next, more out of habit than anything else, simply to verify its response. Feeling the Psynergy amplify and course through the ship's folded wings, he nodded to himself and relaxed it.

He moved back to the barrels and crates just forward of the cabins, opening their tops and looking inside. The rice barrel was still mostly full, but the crate of potatoes and bread had fallen under half. The supply of dried meat seemed to be almost entirely used up by the pirates. His check on the remaining food stores indicated the same – a significant drop in the highest demanded, and also highest priced, foodstuffs. They would likely just need to be refilled in Lemuria.

Lemuria...

He sighed, then made his way back to the cabins, his checks complete. Stepping inside, he quietly shut the door behind him and sat down at the table, picking his book back up.

"Everything set?" Felix asked from the chair across from him.

"We should get there tomorrow, weather permitting," Piers said, frowning. "Felix...should we really be going back?"

Felix glanced up at him from his own book and raised an eyebrow. "That's never a question you should ask about your own home."

Piers looked down. "I know I shouldn't, but...I mean, I am an exile. What if they simply don't let me in?"

"Then I'm sure Hydros will come to you," Felix said seriously. "Why are you so worried about this? The others have already arrived and will have had time to get around any delays."

"What if they weren't allowed in either?"

Felix stared at him. "Can you really imagine them telling Jenna that she can't come in?"

Piers held the gaze for a few moments, then burst out laughing. "No, I suppose I really can't," he said eventually. "I don't mean to be so negative about it, Felix. I just...other than our single night there, I haven't been home in almost a year. And from what I heard, I'll never be allowed to return."

"Trust me, I know how you feel." Felix leaned back in his chair as Piers turned a questioning eye on him. "Oh, that's right, you left before our true homecoming. You missed quite a show."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Was there more to come after your families?"

A wry smile wormed onto Felix's face as he placed his hands behind his head. "You could say that. We returned to Vault, where everyone had evacuated to, and I received a...less than warm welcome."

"Because you originally helped to steal the Stars?"

Felix nodded. "Isaac and Garet were treated pretty coolly, but people believed they had been tricked by me into helping. I, however, was the one who broke into our town's sacred sanctum, aided those responsible for devastating the town years before, stole a dangerous treasure that we had sworn to protect, taken my own sister as a hostage, left two of my friends for dead, and then proceeded to bring about the end of the world."

Piers stared at him for a moment incredulously. "They think all that? Did you explain to them anything?"

Shrugging, Felix said, "We tried. When Kraden tried to tell them about Alchemy's seal, they ran him out while screaming blasphemy. My parents and Kyle were believed to have been confounded or brainwashed by Prox, and everyone thought Jenna was simply trying to cover for me as family."

"They didn't believe Isaac, either?"

Felix chuckled at that. "They still think I manipulated him and Garet into thinking that I was trying to save the world. They said Isaac was naïve enough to trust his old friend, and that Garet would simply follow him." He shook his head. "I never thought I would have found myself defending Garet's sensibility, but that over-simplification made me angry. I may have lost my temper a bit at that point."

"You? Lose your temper?" Piers raised an eyebrow. "A rare sight indeed."

Felix nodded, pulling his canteen up and taking a long drink. "It hurt me in the end, though. When they saw the quiet, calm boy they once knew shouting at them, they realized I had been lost."

"So they exiled you?"

"Ah, not quite," Felix said, smiling. "You see, with Vale destroyed, Valeans no longer have a town to call their own. As such, they have no means of exiling me from anything."

He let the statement hang for a moment before Piers understood, a smile creeping onto his own face. "I doubt they were pleased when you pointed that out."

"Let's just say that, compared to the mayor, I once again looked like a quiet, calm boy."

Piers smiled with Felix in silence for a minute, but the humor began to fade quickly. "Doesn't it bother you, though?" he asked eventually. "That most of the people you knew consider you a traitor?"

Felix shrugged. "Not particularly. The few people I considered my friends in Vale, outside of our group, all believe me. Let the rest believe what they want. I have my family, I have my friends, and now, I have my freedom. I like having full control of my own life, to do with it what I want."

"I suppose that is a good thing," Piers said, looking forward out the window, checking their path again automatically. "I never really minded living only in Lemuria."

"Perhaps not," Felix said, "but now that you've seen so many other places, could you really keep yourself there forever?"

He thought about it for a long moment. Could he? He had already lived there for many, many years without the slightest desire to leave. Though, he realized, he had been raised to think of Lemuria as the entire world. He knew nothing about the world beyond the island, never mind seen any of it. Now that he had seen the shimmering snowfields of Prox, the white beaches of Apojii, the thick jungles of Kimbobo, the soaring cliffs of Champa, could he really restrict himself to a single sight for the remainder of his years?

"No," he said at last. "I suppose I couldn't. I never thought of it before, but I think I would find it...boring." He looked back at Felix hesitantly. "Is it...wrong of me to think that?"

"Not at all," Felix said, shaking his head. "With all the things we've seen, how could you find anything normal exciting again? Besides, at least you have a home to return to someday," he added. "Mine is gone forever."

"But you can still see your friends and family," the Lemurian said. "My only remaining family and few friends are locked into the one place that I am locked out of."

"Would you change your decision, though?"

Piers turned to the side in sync with Felix, finding Hama standing in the doorway from the lower cabins. "I apologize," she said, slightly embarrassed. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I couldn't help but notice our similar situations."

Felix raised an eyebrow at her, but gestured to a chair. Thanking him, she joined them at the table. A silence followed as all three looked at the spirals in the grain of the wood.

"What did you mean?" Piers asked eventually, breaking the awkward silence. "I'm not sure I understand what similar situation you're in."

"It is often said that home is where the heart is," she began, then motioned to Felix. "You have embraced this. You are willing to make your home anywhere, so long as you have your family, your friends, and your freedom. But what if your home has no heart?"

Hama paused, looking down momentarily. "I returned to my home. The home where I watched my baby brother given away because of a prophecy. The home where I watched my mother slowly wither away and die while I could do nothing. The home I willingly left behind to make my own life."

"Why go back, then?" Piers asked. "Were you unhappy where you lived prior?"

Shaking her head, Hama said, "No, but I had to return. I knew I needed to get the Wings of Anemos ready for your

arrival. After all I had pushed and worked to get them ready, the people of Contigo had become devoted to me. They named me Quetzalcoatl, a title that has not been used in many years."

"What does Quetzalcoatl mean?" Felix asked. "I've heard you mention it before, and know it essentially stands for the leader of Contigo, but what does the word itself mean?"

"It means 'Feathered Serpent'," Hama said. "As the story goes, it actually began as an insult. When Yegolas betrayed Anemos and doused Jupiter Lighthouse, they left him behind in Contigo, claiming that even though he had the feathers of a bird, he was fit to do no more than slither on the ground."

Felix smiled. "So he took the name and wore it proudly."

Hama nodded. "He passed it on to mean one of Anemian blood, given how few were left. It traditionally goes to one who has displayed power over the wind, of which I was the first in almost a hundred years. People had begun to think such a gift had left the world." The woman shifted in her seat. "I don't mean to complain about it, really. I knew it would happen, and made my choice regardless."

"I did the same," Piers said. "I was granted a miracle before I left Lemuria the first time, and by technicality could not be exiled. The second time, however...I left knowing I might never return. That I *would* never return."

"But do you regret that decision?" Hama asked.

Piers hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. "No. I knew what needed to be done. My own fate mattered little compared to the fate of Weyard itself."

"What about you?" she asked again, turning to Felix. "Do you regret any part of your path?"

He shook his head without hesitation. "Not for any of the choices I knowingly made, no."

She nodded. "None of us do. We did what was needed of us for the greater good of Weyard. We knew the consequences of our actions when we made the decisions. In light of that, is it so wrong to have one of the negative consequences...overturned?"

Piers raised an eyebrow. "Overturned?"

Shrugging, Hama said, "I am not one to ask about the nature of fate. I am a bit...biased about it. However, should such a thing exist, would it be unreasonable to think that it might simply be delivering payment for services rendered?"

"So in reward for saving the world, I would regain what I gave up in the process?"

Felix nodded. "Not out of the realm of possibilities. Remember Mars."

Piers leaned back in his chair again. "I suppose it would be nice to think that our good deeds would be repaid in kind, though I doubt I can commit to that line of thinking."

"Hope for the best," Hama said. "Plan for the worst."

A short silence filled the cabin, though it lacked the intense awkwardness the previous one held. Piers looked around, feeling the gentle sway shift him back and forth slightly, his eyes taking in his familiar surroundings. "I will say, though," he began, "that I would have no qualms in giving up Champa for the remainder of my life."

Raising his own eyebrow, Felix said, "Was the hospitality that bad?"

"Oh, no," Piers said quickly, shaking his head. "No, Briggs and Chaucha were wonderful hosts, helping me in any way I needed. It was just...I don't think I was meant to live in caves. They're so...gloomy."

"The ocean is your true home?" Hama asked.

Piers shook his head again. "No. I enjoy my time on the ocean, and absolutely love the *Kailani*, but I can never spend very long at sea. I would go mad." He glanced around the cabin again. "Though it is comforting to be back." His eyes then turned on Felix, a grin forming. "And this time, no one needed any...*assistance* in getting back to the ship."

Felix shot him a quick glare, accompanied by one of the finest scowls Piers had seen recently, including the ones perfected by the sailors of Champa. "I thought we agreed to not mention that again."

"You made that arrangement," Piers said. "I agreed to nothing."

"That wasn't even this tower."

"Close enough."

"Noted, Piers."

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A gentle noise reached Garet's ears, slowly prodding his mind awake. As he came to, the sound seemed to move closer and closer, until he finally recognized it as some sort of music. His eyelids moved slowly, fighting their way open,

revealing a light purple blur. He blinked once, clearing some of the blur, then several more times, eventually realizing that he was looking at a ceiling.

As he propped himself up, a sharp pain shot through his chest. His hand instantly moved to the source as he groaned, finding a swath of bandages wrapped around his torso. Where his fingers touched, a duller pain spread, but he quickly realized the worst pain came from his movement, so he straightened his body out while shifting into a sitting position. His chest still felt hot where it had been burned, a ring of sweat settled around it.

"Still hurt?"

He looked to the side and could make out Mia sitting near the bed. He blinked a few more times and she came into focus, the last of the blur clearing. A closed book rested in her lap, her fingers inside to hold the page. "Yeah, a little. What time is it?"

Mia slid a small piece of paper into her book, then placed it on the desk as she stood up, stepping over to him. She gently placed her hand on his chest and he felt the Psynergy wash over his wound like cool water. The burn was not serious, then – likely only a second-degree. He had suffered the same before, though none quite so large.

When she removed her hand, the heat returned, but the pain had lessened slightly. He shifted himself carefully, sitting up a bit further. "It's a little after noon," she said, eying his bandages. "Are you feeling fine?"

"Yeah," he said absently, rubbing his head. After noon? They'd left Tolbi about this time. Had he slept for an entire day? Though his memory grew faded as it approached the

present, he remembered the fight with Clotho, moving into some house afterward, being tended to by Mia, then...

"That little punk," he said suddenly, looking up at Mia. "He put me to sleep again, didn't he?"

She looked back down at him. "Yes, on my orders. King Hydros took one of those light attacks after having cooled it with a significant length of water, and he had one of the worst non-lethal chest burns I've ever seen. I was worried I would look at you and simply find a hole."

Garet frowned, looking away. "I suppose I can let it go, then. You know I hate being under like that, though."

"Yes, well I hate you being so injured like this," Mia snapped, placing her hands on her hips. "If you would stop getting hurt, neither you or I would need to worry about putting you into such a deep sleep." Before he could respond, she stood back and motioned with her hands. "Come on, up. I need to make sure the bandages will hold with you moving."

With an exaggerated sigh, Garet slowly moved his legs, turning his body in such a way to prevent twisting his chest much. "You've seen the king, then?" he asked as he carefully tipped his body onto his feet. "How is he handling it?"

"Not nearly as well as you," Mia said, pursing her lips. She made a circular motion with her hand, so Garet started walking around the room slowly. "That Anemian was right – it probably should have killed you, assuming the two blasts were of similar strength."

Garet shrugged from across the room, then hissed in pain. "Dammit...ah... I don't think so, though. Even if it's from Jupiter, all Mars Adepts are pretty resistant to burns."

Mia frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe. Maybe the king hadn't weakened his as much as I- Oh Garet, don't pick at the bandages!"

His hand stopped mid-scratch as he looked from Mia to it, confused, then slowly lowered it to his side. "Sorry, didn't mean to."

Shaking her head, Mia sat back down in her chair. As she picked her book back up and reopened it, she said, "Your bandages look fine. How do you feel?"

"Other than the pain when I move wrong, fine," Garet said, stretching his arms in various directions cautiously. If he moved slowly, he realized, he could make use of a moderate range of movement. Anything that resulted in taut or folded skin on his chest, though, would have to wait until the burn healed, unless he wanted to make sailors around the world blush.

Once done, he looked around him once again. The entire room seemed to be made of stone, making him think of a dungeon, but the colorful rugs covering most of the floor said otherwise. He could see his own pack against the wall, where someone had apparently left it for him. A bookshelf sat against one wall, but only one shelf held any books. On the rest sat a variety of wooden carvings, some much more detailed than others. At one end of the room a door remained shut, but at the other end, it lay open to the outside. He could see the swirling white and blue of Lemuria's skies, along with the gently rustling branches of a tree. He stared at the tree for a long moment.

"Where are we?" he asked finally, turning away, grabbing a shirt from his pack, and pulling it on slowly.

"Staying with Lunpa, the Righteous Thief." Mia looked up at him, a smile playing on her face. "Apparently, Jenna and Sheba are on rather good terms with him. He stole their attention and they've been talking with him almost non-stop since yesterday. They, in turn, stole Ivan."

Garet nodded slowly. He had heard about Lunpa's residence in Lemuria from Jenna, and while it had surprised him at the time, he realized now that he was becoming harder and harder to surprise with seemingly impossible events. Other things were on his mind, as well. "Is Isaac down there too?"

Mia shook her head. "He left a little earlier this morning, after I took over watching you. I think he might have headed to the library on the other side of the island."

"...He went to a library?" Garet raised an eyebrow. "I'm asking about Isaac, not Ivan."

Frowning, Mia said, "I heard you the first time. He'd mentioned how the library might have useful information on the Anemoi, given how old it is."

"I guess," Garet said slowly, looking at the window thoughtfully. "So...you were taking turns watching over me until I woke up?"

Mia simply made a sound of agreement, not looking up from her book.

"Well, you know, I'm fine now, so-"

"Garet, if you want to leave, I'm not going to bother stopping you." Mia turned her eyes up at him without moving her head. "You don't need to try and create some half-formed excuse for me to leave so you can sneak out the window."

He inhaled sharply, casting an irritated glance at the window, as if it had sold him out. "You're not? Why?"

"Why bother?" she asked, looking back at her book. "I'd rather not see you break an arm sneaking out with that injury."

"Oh." He looked from her, to the door, back at the window, starting to wonder exactly *how* he would have pulled it off, then back at her again. "Well, uh, thanks." He stepped towards the door and opened it, but as he pulled it shut again behind him, he heard Mia call his name. Poking his head back through the crack, he found her looking up at him with a frown on her face. "What?"

"Please don't pester the locals."

He flashed her a huge grin, which only served to deepen her frown. "Don't worry, I promise I'll leave them alone." He continued to stare at her while backing out, until the closing of the door finally broke their line of sight.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he found Jenna, Sheba, Ivan, and a man he assumed to be Lunpa sitting on the floor, all looking up at him. "Garet!" Jenna nearly shouted, a grin spreading over her face. "You're not a cripple!"

"Jenna!" he said, his face mimicking hers. "You're still loud!"

"How are you feeling?" Ivan asked.

He shrugged. "Like some jerk just threw a kettle of boiling water onto me. Not too bad, considering how I heard the king got off."

Sheba grimaced, wringing her hands in her lap. "Yeah, Hydros didn't look good when I went with Mia. She says he'll be fine, but you wouldn't know it from seeing him."

"You should come sit with us," Jenna said, patting the floor next to her. "Lunpa is telling us about his daring break-in to Sol Sanctum."

"I don't know if 'daring' is the right word for sneaking in while the entire town slept," Lunpa said, causing the other three to smile slightly.

Garet hesitated for a moment, then shook his head. "Sorry, not right now. I'm trying to find Isaac."

The small smile on Ivan's face faded slowly. "He left a while ago. Garet...do you really need him right now?"

Their eyes met for a moment, and Garet realized that all the same concerns he held inside, Ivan shared. The unspoken uncertainty in his plan did nothing to ease them, he realized sourly.

As direct and bold as he tended to be, Garet never liked confrontations with friends. He had seen the disasters a wrong word wrought in arguments, driving wedges between people for weeks, months, or even years.

Sometimes those wrong words came to him, even without any confrontations. He had once accidentally upset Mia so badly that the young woman had been nearly driven to tears and had to leave the campfire. Yet sometimes the right words came, equally as unbidden. After following her, Garet's words had been enough to console her and restore her composure.

But sometimes, words could not heal a wound. They could not always repair the damage done, or in the worst of cases, rebuild a bridge that had burned. He lacked the skill to distinguish what effect his words would always have, usually in times of thick emotion.

The last thing he wanted was to hurt Isaac in that way.

Don't lie to him.

Garet nodded, realizing his path's only alternative was the road of silent acceptance – an unacceptable alternative to him. He needed some kind of resolution. The best he could do would be to keep Felix's advice in mind when the time came. "I do," he said, and Ivan's violet eyes flicked down. Jenna and Sheba looked between the two silently, unsure of what they had just missed.

Turning his gaze to Lunpa, he asked, "Where's the library here?"

Sheba gasped, placing her hands over her mouth and staring at him wide-eyed. Garet made a face at her, forcing her to collapse into a giggle fit, then turned back to Lunpa.

The thief, though holding back a smile at the exchange, made no comment about it. "Take a right when you leave my house, and keep walking until you pass the fountain. Three buildings down on your right will be the library."

"Thanks," Garet said, shooting another dirty look at Sheba, which only caused her to burst into giggles again. Their sound followed him until he shut the front door, stopping for a moment to soak in the sunshine. It felt good on his skin, warming him in a soothing way to contrast the heat from his burn. A slight breeze blew across the island from the ocean, sending some leaves swirling around his feet.

Lunpa's directions and the wind led him all the way to the library, though it looked no different on the outside from any other building around him. The same stones used everywhere else, that light shade of purple that almost seemed white, made up the large building. He paused outside momentarily, but could find nothing that indicated this was not simply someone's house.

He pushed open the door slowly, peering inside carefully to make sure he had the right building. A musty smell rushed out immediately, eager to escape and lose itself in the fresh air. After a short snort and shake of his head, Garet found the odor tolerable and opened the door wider. As expected, inside were bookshelves, crammed tight, along with a lone table and chair in the front, both empty.

Stepping inside and letting the door swing shut behind him, Garet noticed that a thick layer of dust covered the majority of the building. He found himself surprised at the lack of cobwebs, until he remembered that this was an island, and an isolated one at that; it was entirely possible no spiders lived here.

He moved forward slowly, noticing the disturbed trail of dust that moved through the center aisle. He glanced up at the books, but found their spines covered in dust as well, their titles obscured by the sheet of gray. On the sides of the bookshelves, though, the small plaques that described the shelves' contents had been brushed clean.

He glanced back at the floor and realized the trail went all the way to the back of the building, so he followed it, glancing up at the stacks as he walked. He passed by Geography, Politics, Theology, Philosophy, Mathematics, Fiction, and two rows of Science before reaching the final row of History.

As he began to round the corner, he saw a pair of boots upright on the ground, the person in them obviously seated on the floor against the bookshelf. "Isaac," he started, but as he came into full view, he stopped.

Alex looked up at him from the book in his lap. "Not blond enough for that."

Garet stared at him for a moment before the dull pain spreading across his chest informed him that every muscle in his body had tensed. He relaxed them, feeling the pain fade. "Where's Isaac?"

Shrugging, Alex said, "I haven't a clue. He came in some time ago, but when he found me here already, he left."

"What *are* you doing here?" Garet asked, glancing around as he looked for signs of a fight. He mentally kicked himself a moment later, though. If Alex wanted them gone, he could have done it without need for subtlety. He needed them around for something, no doubt.

"The same thing Isaac came here rather halfheartedly to do, I imagine," Alex said, gesturing to a pile of books next to him. "Gather information on our enemies and how to defeat them."

Garet hesitated, torn between two lines of questioning, then decided on the more important of the two. "Have you found anything out? What sort of army are we facing?"

Alex shook his head. "Most of these books were written in times of peace. Their military might is not discussed much."

"So not much, then."

Shaking his head again, Alex said, "On the contrary, they've helped me glean quite a bit of information about the culture and civilization itself. Understanding a group of people, in more matters than simply military, is essential in overcoming them. Through understanding, I gain insight. Through insight, I can determine their weaknesses and where best to strike in order to halt this war, hopefully without any further bloodshed."

Garet moved to fold his arms across his chest, but a sharp pain quickly reminded him not to try. "I'm not sure how you could do that without defeating them."

Alex pursed his lips, thinking for a moment. After a few seconds, he looked back up and said, "Think of it in terms of the body. If you hurl all of your strength at someone's body, after enough time, they will eventually be killed, right? Sheer bludgeoning will defeat them."

Nodding, Garet said, "But that's not very effective."

"Exactly." Alex set the book aside and stood up. "Instead of attacking with brute force, warriors aim for key points that will end the fight faster, and with less effort." He gestured to Garet's head, throat, and then stomach. "This is especially important with warriors not as strong as their opponents, such as Ivan, who cannot simply overpower another."

"True," Garet said. He had seen Ivan dispatch many a monster by striking critical blows in vital areas.

"But in situations where one is severely outmatched, even more precise attacks become useful," Alex said. He gently touched Garet's temple with one finger, up under his chin, the front of his throat, his wrist, and the area just beneath where his ribs joined his sternum, earning a slight intake of breath from Garet. Alex quickly withdrew his hand. "My

apologies. However, you understand my point. You know these locations, as well."

"I do," Garet said. "A single blow to the temple can kill a man. A quick jab to the windpipe or piercing a lung will leave him unable to breathe. A cut to the back of the leg can bleed him out in minutes, or leave him unable to move, depending on where you hit. There's a hundred small places like these."

Alex nodded. "And these are the places I'm searching for, these critical weak points in the Anemian war machine. They could be things like a specific resource, or a select few charismatic individuals. By knowing the how and why about my enemy, I can find ways to disable them efficiently."

"I think I understand," Garet said. "Like how Babi single-handedly defeated Lalivero by kidnapping Sheba."

"Exactly. She was their weak point. By taking her, he brought Lalivero under his control without spilling a single drop of blood."

Garet frowned. "Is that what you're hoping to find, though? Something underhanded like that?"

Sighing, Alex turned away and remained silent for a few seconds. "This is why you were searching for Isaac, isn't it? You disagree with his methods of obtaining entry to Lemuria."

"Of course I do," Garet said. "He tricked them into thinking we were here to help, forcing them to break their own rules."

"But we are here to help, Garet," Alex said, turning back around. "Had we not done that, King Hydros would likely have been killed by King Clotho."

"But he didn't know that."

"He knew there was a sense of urgency, and he acted on it." Alex narrowed his eyes slightly. "He even tried to ease your guilt by simply tricking his way in, instead of forcing it. No harm was dealt, and we were all let in willingly by the guards."

"He lied to them!" Garet nearly shouted. "He lied to get us in here!"

Alex nodded. "Perhaps in the details. But was his reasoning really a lie? The Lemurians were attacked by the Anemoi. We came to try and stop the Anemoi. Isaac told them we had come to help, and needed to speak to the king. He told a white lie in regards to the specific reason, but the intent was the same."

Garet looked away, his hands curling into fists. "But we're supposed to be better than them, not sink to their level. We're supposed to follow the rules."

"In that case, what would you have done, Garet?" Alex asked gently. "Can you think of any way to have sped up our entry without lies or force?"

He had thought about it on the way over, knowing the question would come up with Isaac. "...No."

"Then you should understand that Isaac did what he had to for the greater good," he continued. "Sometimes, there are no right decisions. At some points, there can be no avoiding harming someone. At those times, one simply must try to make the decision that causes the least harm."

The greater good... Thoughts of Mars Lighthouse came to Garet's mind. Isaac had been the only one to see through

the Wise One's trick, other than Kraden. He had willingly resolved to kill his own father, knowing that failing to do so would result in Weyard's eventual destruction.

Compared to that, what did a simple lie to some people he had never met mean?

The thought and its implications chilled Garet, but it also cleared his anger. Of all of them, Isaac knew what it meant to make hard decisions. He had not made them out of a false sense of urgency, but a clear view of the overarching plan. Nor was he simply willing to only deal harm to others in the name of the greater good, but also willing to take it on himself.

"You're...right." Garet unclenched his hands, looking down. "He had no choice."

"He *did* have a choice," Alex corrected. "What you have to remember is what he chose."

Garet nodded. "Yeah. I...thanks, Alex." He looked back up at the Mercury Adept. "Um...are you staying here?"

"Yes. I know my presence creates tension in your group, so I would rather find something useful to occupy my time with alone." He gestured around him in a broad sweep of his arm. "Besides, I will likely never again find myself with such an opportunity to peer into the past. I would like to make as much use of the opportunity as possible."

Garet stepped back slowly. "Okay. Well...see you." He turned around before Alex could respond and walked out the door. It was not until the sun hit him once more that he realized how cold the library had been.

Chapter 8: By Duty, Divided

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 8 – By Duty, Divided

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The doors to Kraden's palace burst open as another explosion shook the walls, knocking a painting to the floor. Ivan dashed inside, eyes tearing across the entrance hall furiously, then ran down the hallway on his right. Servants ran the opposite direction, screaming and streaming out the doors.

He paid them no attention, slipping past their panicked bodies as he ran, listening intently for the sounds of battle. A loud thump from upstairs drew him to the stairwell at the end of the hall before he could even acknowledge it, hurtling him up to the third floor. He could not remember his feet touching the stairs, part of him idly wondering if he had simply flown.

As he reached the final landing, however, the din ceased. The silence that filled his ears pierced his entire body, chilling him as if ice had been poured directly into his blood. He stepped forward slowly, moving towards the lone ajar door in the hallway, dreading what he might find inside. He could feel the nausea rising in his stomach as the waves of terror doubled upon each other, pushing higher and higher.

One foot stepped in front of the other in a steady rhythm, the only method of advancing Ivan could manage, torn between racing forward to help and backward to flee. He wanted desperately to call out Isaac's name, but his tongue

felt thick and useless in his mouth, his vocal chords refusing to obey.

After an eternity of approach, he slowly turned into the open doorway, his breath stilling in anticipation. The room itself lay in complete disarray, furniture and linen lying about in a chaotic mess. The bed had been split in half like a piece of driftwood, the ends flung to separate walls.

Alongside one of those walls lay Piers, on his stomach and unmoving. The air around him stood completely still, no oscillations or eddies of any kind. His head faced the wall at an odd angle, gazing up at a great crack that ran through it.

In the center of the floor lay Isaac, pinned down through his chest by his own sword. Ivan numbly stepped forward and knelt down in the growing pool of blood, reaching out to gently shut his friend's blankly staring eyes. He ran his fingers through Isaac's wild hair tenderly, streaking the blond with a deep red.

All fear had completely left Ivan, along with all other feelings, leaving him empty and cold. When he looked up, rage ignited in his empty shell like a forge, scorching all reason and control. He opened his mouth and screamed, a wordless shriek that combined his grief and anger, focusing it all at the man standing in the sunlit window before him.

Alex merely smiled.

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"Piers."

The man looked up slowly, his heart thumping. The pair of guards gazed down at him, their faces unreadable. The

stairs that stretched between them seemed to go on forever as his vision briefly swam, warping the path ahead.

The moment of truth, he realized, and yet the matter was, in reality, mostly irrelevant. Even if Hydros made an exception to allow him entrance, his departure once more would only more firmly seal his sentence.

But try as he might to rationalize the situation, he could not calm himself down. He could feel the tiny beads of sweat forming in the center of his back, trickling down slowly. He absentmindedly rubbed his hands on the sides of his pants, drying his palms long enough to feel them grow moist once more. His chest felt numb, only the sharp pounding within giving him reason to believe it held anything.

After a moment that lasted an eternity, the guards parted. "Welcome back, Piers," one said with a smile.

A breath escaped from his lungs, one he had not realized had been held. He felt his whole body relax, the pounding in his chest now seeming unnecessary. Felix's hand lightly patted him on the back, simultaneously telling him 'congratulations' and 'hurry up'. When he stepped forward, though, the other guard placed a hand out.

"The king has claimed emergency powers for the moment, Piers," he said. "It is by his command that your exile be pardoned. Realize that this is merely a temporary reprieve. Once his powers expire, you will be banished once more."

To his own surprise, Piers smiled. "That's fine. I'm sure there will always be another calamity that the king will need my services for."

He stepped forward again, walking past both guards, Felix and Hama following. "He didn't seem very pleased about

that," Felix muttered.

Piers shook his head. "Adrian has never been very supportive of the king. He disagrees with the idea of a single man having such overwhelming power."

"Ironic how in fighting it here, he inadvertently supports it elsewhere," Hama said softly.

A short distance away, Piers could see the great fountain, and his feet automatically began curving him to the left. After a few seconds, he realized this and stopped. "I...will find you in a little bit."

Felix stopped as well and turned back to him. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," Piers said, nodding. "I just want to take care of some personal matters, in case...in case I don't have the opportunity later."

"Of course." Felix turned back around. "We'll wait for you before seeing Hydros, then. I'm sure he's in no rush."

"Thank you," Piers called, then continued on his unconscious path. As he walked, a terrifying thought bloomed in his head: last time he had returned to Lemuria, he had arrived to the news of his mother's death. What if the same had happened this time?

His pace quickened, though he realized that the difference in seconds would mean nothing, ignoring the Lemurians that called out to him. A part of him, in the back of his mind, hoped they would understand his intentions. At the moment, most of him did not care if they thought him the most inconsiderate man to walk the face of Weyard.

When he arrived at his family's house, he stopped suddenly, eying the stone strangely. When had he stopped thinking of it as his own house, he wondered? True, he had not lived in it for some time, but was it not still his home?

Shaking his head, he stepped to the door, pushed it open slowly, and peered inside. The curtains were drawn across the windows, casting the room into shadow. As he opened the door further, the light spilled onto the floor, outlining a path into the house.

He stepped in gingerly, as if making noise on the stone would somehow make real his worst fears. "Hello?" he called out softly. "Uncle?"

A rustling came from his right side, along with the sound of something heavy moving. Piers stopped, his mind instantly preparing to snap-freeze everything around him at a sudden movement. A soft, familiar groan reached his ears next and he relaxed his reaction. "Uncle? Did I wake you?"

The movements stopped, silence filling the house for several seconds. "...Piers? Is that you?"

Piers nodded, then realized his uncle probably could not see him well, if at all. "It is. I've returned again."

In the shadowed corner, he could just make out the form of a person sitting up, accompanied by the rustling of a blanket. "Open the windows. I want to see you."

He obliged, stepping to the side and pulling the curtain aside. Light flooded into the room as he draped the heavy curtain over a hook to the window's side, then turned back around. Ensio sat on the edge of his bed, squinting and wearing nothing more than a pair of loose shorts. He and

Piers stared at each other for a moment, and then Ensio broke out into a grin. "Come here, you."

Piers stepped over to his uncle, embracing him tightly. "It's been too long," the older man said as they pulled apart.

"It's only been about a year," Piers said, raising an eyebrow.

"Too long," Ensio repeated firmly.

Piers glanced down and nodded. "I must confess I was afraid... I was afraid of showing up, only to find the house empty."

Ensio looked up sharply. "Why would you fear that?"

"It's just... I guess I was simply remembering mother," he said slowly. "I remembered coming back, only to find out...about her. I feared the same feeling."

"We can't spend our time fearing death," Ensio said gently. "Not with the spring, and certainly not without it. Not ours or anyone else's."

Piers shook his head. "Isn't it the fear of death that keeps us alive, that gives us caution?"

"Only when held in the back of the mind. To focus on it is to focus on disaster," his uncle said, then waved his hand. "But enough philosophy. How have you been? You look well."

Smiling, Piers said, "Things have been...interesting recently. I've been handling them, though. I enjoyed an extended vacation in a beautiful port town."

Ensio leaned back, howling with laughter. "I just heard about that from Lunpa. I see you've managed to escape, though.

Must've been terrible."

"I would say you should try living in a cave, but it seems you've already decided to do that," Piers said, gesturing around him with an arm.

"I've been a bit ill for a couple days, so I've been trying to sleep it off."

Piers glanced down and grabbed the blanket lying on the bed beside them. "And trying to sweat it out, apparently," he said, holding up the thick, woolen cover.

Ensio shrugged. "It came with a fever, so it seemed like a suitable plan of action."

Frowning, Piers said, "Is it working? I've got a friend here who is an exceptional healer. I'm sure she would have no problem looking you over."

His uncle waved it off. "I'm feeling better today, don't worry about it. Instead, tell me about this Clotho bastard."

"Who?"

Ensio stared at him for a moment, incredulous. "Have you not heard what happened to the king?"

Piers' spine ran cold at the words. "No. Tell me!"

"He's fine at the moment," his uncle said, patting Piers' shoulder reassuringly, "but he was attacked three days ago by an Anemian King. He was saved when your friends interfered, forcing this Clotho to retreat."

He stood up immediately, making for the door. "I need to go see him."

"Piers, wait!" The man stopped and looked back silently. "He's been recovering since then, and he hasn't been in good condition. He's probably asleep right now."

Piers stood in the middle of the room for a long moment, swaying slightly as he debated his choices. Eventually, however, he followed his uncle's words and returned to the bed.

"I swear," Ensio said, "you are every bit as loyal to him as Kai was."

"I have good reason to be," Piers said defensively.

Ensio nodded. "True, I suppose he has done great things for you. Kai always confused me with that, though, because she had every reason to hate him."

Piers shrugged. "Kings have to make hard choices. Mother never held it against him personally."

"Doesn't mean it would have wrong of her to. Or you, for that matter. Alcoholics make for poor father substitutes."

Glancing around the room, Piers said, "You seem to have gotten better about it, though. Last time, the place was quite a mess."

Ensio grimaced and looked away. "I like to think that last time I had an excuse. I didn't want the losses of both my sister and my nephew on my mind. After you left, I pulled everything together. At least, more than it was."

"You could always find some more productive use for your Psynergy, instead," Piers said with a frown.

"Alchemy has more uses than simply combat," Ensio said. "I'm sure that someday, someone will find a better use for my techniques. I'll gladly give them all the details." He waved his hand again. "But you keep dragging me into boring subjects. You don't need to hear about my vices. How have you been? Other than your most recent adventure, of course. Still with that group?"

"We parted ways after Alchemy was restored, though we kept in touch. I started trading between cities, trying to encourage them to do the same. I'd like to see the Eastern Sea trade grow and lure our home out of isolation again."

Ensio nodded. "An important business. So you found a new crew, then? Any of them fill the hole your dark-haired stranger left in your heart?"

Piers stared at him, his eyes narrowing slightly. "What?"

"You know, that man with the ponytail. Weren't you and he, you know..." Ensio gestured vaguely with his hands.

"No!" Piers nearly shouted. "Gods, why does everyone seem to think that?"

"It's perfectly fine if you are," Ensio said mildly. "Kai would have loved to see you with someone that made you happy."

Shaking his head, Piers said, "That's not the case at all. Please, uncle. I've come to expect this from young girls, but from you?"

Ensio shrugged again. "You two were always near each other when you came here, and always seemed like you were the parents of the group."

Piers rolled his eyes and said, "That's because we *were*. That's what happens when you have two immature teenage girls and an oft-immature old man. It took both of us to hold their reins. Besides," he looked away, "Felix is one of the only people I can truly rely on for anything, and I to him. He's like a brother, or at least what I would imagine one to be like."

A silence fell between them as Piers thought about that. Felix always remained fairly aloof to everyone else, even his old friend Isaac, but he and Piers had quickly forged a trusting bond. He suspected it did have to do, at least partially, with the caretaking of Jenna and Sheba, something which he believed Felix had grown weary of doing alone.

"You're really making a bad case for your denial of this relationship, Piers."

He looked over at his uncle, grinning. "Words will never sway you, will they?"

Ensio's grin matched his own. "Not until I see you wedded – properly or otherwise."

Piers laughed and said, "I'm afraid if you want to see that, you'll have to get yourself banished as well. Either that, or make my marriage a worldwide catastrophe."

"Eh, we'll see what the king can do about that." Ensio slapped his back. "Come on, you should get going to see him. There are more important things than me that you need to focus on."

Piers stood up slowly, turning back around to give his uncle another tight hug. "I'll stop in to say goodbye before we leave."

"Make sure to bring your brown-haired boy, too. I should meet my new nephew."

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Scrape.

Ivan slid the whetstone across his sword carefully, the blade gleaming in the morning sun. Its edge had found little use lately, but every once in a while, when the tedium of paperwork began to eat at him, his whetstone came out again.

Scrape.

It reminded him of his position, now. No longer was he simply a servant to a high-ranking lord, or an apprentice merchant, or a bookkeeper. His skill with the sword, though nowhere near as refined as Garet's or Felix's, had come a long way. Though he refused to flaunt it, many times had the thought come across his mind of finding out just how many people in Kalay actually *could* beat him in a fight now.

Scrape.

And that spoke nothing of his skill in Psynergy, either. Seeing and manipulating the potentials around him came to him more easily than everyday conversations. From subtle adjustments in pressure to sharp alterations in charge, wind and lightning bent to his will in ways that made him feel more like a god than a boy. His studies in science had only improved his control, the laws of physics explaining what most Jupiter Adepts only learned from trial and error.

Scrape.

No, his list of occupations now read warrior, sorcerer, and when his pride began to swell, hero, too. His sword felt as much a part of him as his Psynergy and his intellect. What had once seemed like a dreary chore had become almost a ritual of sorts, a way to relieve stress and focus his thoughts.

Scrape.

And they certainly needed focused right now.

Scrape.

Scrape.

He paused midway through one movement, his whetstone sitting still on the blade. "Hello, Jenna." Careful to continue in the same spot, he finished the motion, then lifted the blade from where it rested on the sheath in his lap, replaced it, and set it aside.

The burgundy-haired girl appeared at his right, sitting down and letting her legs dangle over the edge of the stone roof as well. "How'd you know it was me?"

Ivan smiled. "There's only a few of us roof-dwellers, and you're not nearly as quiet as Sheba."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Next time I'll just push you off first."

"If I go down, I'm bringing you with me," he said seriously.

Shrugging, Jenna said, "No problem. It's so much faster getting down, and this way, I'll have a cushion to land on." She glanced over at him, poking him in the ribs. "Though you make for a crappy cushion. So bony."

"There's a reason I've lived this long," he said, squirming away from her fingers. "Monsters always go for the meaty ones. So long as I stay near Garet, I'm practically invisible."

"No more meat than in that meathead," she said lightly, giving up and leaning back on her hands. "What's up, Ivan?"

He shook his head, then reached up to brush the hair out of his eyes. "Nothing, why?"

Jenna's fist thumped into his shoulder. "Cut it out. You only roof-dwell on your own when you're avoiding people. Speak, boy."

Ivan flashed her a frown, but when she returned it with a questioning eyebrow, he sighed. "You're so demanding. I have no idea how the others all managed to live without locking you in some cellar."

"Quit being so smart-alecky. You've been hanging around Sheba too much, so shut up and answer me." When he simply turned to look at her flatly, she waved her hand. "You know what I mean."

He turned away, leaning back in the same way she had. "It's my dreams. The things I see...they bother me. A lot."

A silence fell between them, only the sound of the leaves rustling in the wind filling the gap. Ivan closed his eyes as he felt the pressures surge and shift, their movements whispered to the tiny hairs on his arms and back of his neck. As he watched without eyes, the pressure dropped and the wind reversed momentarily, like the ocean's waves receding from the sandy shores.

"Was it...Alex again?" Jenna asked after a minute.

He nodded. "It was worse. I saw... I saw Isaac. And Piers. It was... They were..." He trailed off, unable to finish the thought. Not even his nightmares of Karst left him in such a cold sweat upon awakening.

A hand settled on his left shoulder, pulling him to the side as he opened his eyes. Jenna slid up close and rested her head against his, whispering, "You don't have to say it, Ivan. Just put it out of your mind."

"I can't," he muttered, surprising himself with how calm he had stayed, despite letting loose the terrifying thoughts he had been desperately trying to control. "I can't let it happen."

"It won't," she said firmly. "I'll fry the bastard myself before it does. He'll be nothing more than ashes if he tries to hurt anyone."

Ivan sat still for a moment, unable to ignore the conviction in Jenna's voice. Her jovial tone had vanished entirely, her words taking on the air of an oath. "How would we know, though?" he asked after a few seconds. "We already know he's good at hiding his plans."

Jenna sat back up and shrugged. "We keep an eye on him. If he's hiding anything, he'll slip up eventually."

"But how would we even stop him if he did?" Ivan asked. "You know what he can do. We tried to stop him once, and got nowhere."

Rolling her eyes, Jenna said, "Ivan, come on. How often do we actually stop to think about how to beat something?"

He stared at her for a moment. "Seriously? All the time, Jenna. That's what I spend most of my time in a fight doing,

especially when we're outmatched."

Jenna cocked her head to the side. "Really? You always seem to come up with plans in no time."

"That's just it, though," Ivan said, shaking his head. "Things come to me quickly, sure, but only if I'm actively looking for an answer. Whenever something stops me from thinking about it, I can't come up with anything."

Pursing her lips, Jenna said, "See, it's the opposite for me. I just do what seems right, and I get through. Or when things start going wrong, I just use a lot of fire. Quantity over quality works pretty well, sometimes."

Ivan smiled. "What a strange coincidence that you and Garet seem to be the biggest fans of that strategy."

"I told you to cut it out with the smart-aleckiness," she said, flicking his ear with the hand still across his shoulders. "Besides, I remember a certain someone trying to beat a dragon once by dropping as much lightning on it as possible. Remember that one? On our way down from Jupiter?"

Turning slightly pink as he shrugged off her arm, Ivan looked away. "I never said it wasn't a *valid* strategy. It's just not my first."

"Killed that dragon just as dead, though, didn't it?"

He did not respond at first, the faint scent of dragon breath triggered by her words. He remembered when those dragons living in the lighthouse, the blue ones about twice his size, had terrified him to the point of stupefaction. They seemed so insignificant, now. Others, however... "I had a dream about your...the Kindragon."

Though he refused to look at her when he said it, he heard the girl snort. A tense silence hung between them for a few moments, and Ivan began to wonder if it had been wrong to bring the subject up. Before he could try and change it, though, Jenna spoke. "I like how everyone made different names for it."

Ivan chanced a glance at her and found her staring down at her own feet. "Isaac called it the Judgment Dragon, since we were being judged," she continued. "Kraden called it the Doom Dragon, since it would have doomed the entire world to ice. Mia called it the Beast, since it, well, was one." She looked up at the sea. "I can guess the meaning behind yours."

Her words came out so calmly that Ivan decided to chance the question that came to mind. "What do you call it?"

"I call it...Mom," she said quietly, her voice cracking slightly. Again the girl looked down, her hair falling around her face. Her knuckles had grown white from how tightly she clenched the roof's edge.

Ivan instantly kicked himself. "Jenna, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to-"

The mass of cinnamon shook from side to side, and when Jenna looked up at him, she had a smile on her face again. "Don't be, Ivan. You've got nothing to be sorry about."

He glanced down, nervously clenching the legs of his pants. "I should never have brought it up. It was thoughtless of me."

"What's been done is done," she said firmly. "That dragon is the past, and I refuse to be controlled by the past. I made a choice, and I'll live with that choice."

Her tone made him cautiously look up again. "If you could go back...would you change something?"

Jenna looked away, towards the palace that loomed nearby. "Knowing who that dragon was? I would have thrown down my sword."

"Even with the lighthouse unlit?"

"I would let the entire world freeze before I willingly raise a weapon against my family."

A chill slid down Ivan's spine, causing the boy to shiver, despite the warmth of the Lemurian climate. He had never heard Jenna speak with such confident cruelty before. Had he not heard the words come from her mouth himself, he would have sworn they belonged to Felix.

To think it of her, though... He found it difficult. Jenna always maintained so much cheerful optimism, enough to spread it to the others like a disease. He always counted on her to improve his mood, or give him hope when it faded. To hear her speak of sacrificing the entire world with such certainty...

"Ivan?"

He looked up at her suddenly, finding her staring at him with concern on her face. Quickly shaking his head, he said, "Sorry. I didn't want to ruin your mood like this."

They both looked away as another awkward silence fell between them. Why was it that any time someone tried to help him with his own personal problems, he managed to simply shove thorns into theirs? Was spreading misery the only way to alleviate his own?

"What was your dream about?"

He looked up at Jenna in confusion. "Huh?"

"Your dream," she said again. "You said you had a dream about the dragon. What was it?"

"Oh." He shook his head. "Just about us fighting it. You saved me from being eaten in it."

Jenna snorted again. "There was a lot of that going around, if I remember." She paused, chewing on her lower lip thoughtfully. "So it wasn't a prophecy, then?"

"I don't think so," he said. "Sometimes it's hard to tell. It might have just been a warning of danger, though. I doubt that we'll fight another three-headed dragon on Mars Lighthouse, at least."

"No, our enemies this time seem to be birds." Jenna smiled, looking over at him. "No offense, but I think we'll have a much easier time stomping some birds than dragons."

Ivan chuckled. "I hope so. They're interfering with my dull and boring life."

"For which I'll need to thank them," Jenna said. "Maybe by the end of this, you'll have some color in you again."

"Ugh, I hope not," Ivan said with a grimace, looking at his arms. "Do you know how much Master Hammet enjoyed teasing me about the tan I had when I returned home?"

Below them he heard the door open, so he leaned forward and peered down. He saw Isaac walk outside, then turn around and glance up. Ivan raised a hand in a wave, which Isaac returned, then suddenly turned away. "We're, uh, heading over to see the king."

"Alright, we're coming," Ivan said. He stood up and buckled his sword belt back around his waist, then prepared to jump down. The door clattered once more as he heard the others coming out, so he waited patiently for them to move out of his landing area.

Before he could jump, though, Garet turned around and saw them. "So that's where you've been hiding this whole time. What gives?"

Ivan reached down and tapped his sword. "Just keeping it in good condition."

Garet nodded approvingly. "I'll make a proper warrior out of you yet, Ivan." The young man then glanced over at the girl beside him. "Hey Jenna, wearing a skirt on the roof isn't the best of ideas."

Ivan glanced over quickly, in time to see Jenna's eyes widen. Before he could stop her, she had already plunged off the roof, screaming profanity at Garet's quickly escaping form. He shook his head, then stepped off the edge, allowing a buffer of air to land him gently on the ground.

He knew *that* Jenna, definitely.

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"Isaac."

The Venus Adept looked up from the palace floor and found Felix looking at him expectantly. "Yeah, sorry, just got a bit...distracted." As he fell in behind Felix, his eyes drifted back down to the splintered stone of the floor, the only remaining indication of Hydros' extreme power. The king had remained in his bed for almost three days now, constantly

tended to by healers. Mia had declared him lucky to be alive.

With a wave of his hand, the cracks melted back together, restoring the smooth surface and leaving no indication of their damage. The scorch marks remained, however, testament to both Clotho's light and Garet's flames. Isaac could do nothing to remove those, at least not with Psynergy.

As he walked, he turned his mind towards the statues that remained posted in the center of the room. Moving each of them in behind their group, his head suddenly spun briefly. All four statues paused as Isaac reached up to the side of his head, rubbing it as his vision settled. The other day, he had commanded the statues with relative ease, feeling nothing other than the drain on his Psynergy, yet simply trying to move them now made his mind reel from the effort.

"Adrenaline," a voice said softly. Isaac glanced up and found Alex looking back at him. Isaac suddenly felt control of two of the statues taken from him effortlessly, the strain on his mind lessening immediately. "It focuses Psynergy like it focuses other parts of your body, allowing what is normally impossible."

Isaac glanced at the statues, then back at Alex. "Did you read my mind?"

Alex shook his head. "I don't need to, Isaac. I was a keen observer long before I was the holder of the Golden Sun." He gestured to the statues. "I can feel your Psynergy, and could see the effects on you."

Looking past him, Isaac saw Felix turning back to them again, a questioning look on his face. "...Thanks, then."

Pulling the two statues along behind him, Isaac continued on, Alex falling into step beside him.

They proceeded up the stairwell in silence, though Isaac could hear the faint whisperings of curious Lemurians behind him. He had caught them cautiously watching each of them since the attack, but always trying to remain out of sight. Lunpa had explained to them that most Lemurians would not know how to even begin to approach strangers such as they; it had taken years before many would speak to him.

The whispers died off as they reached the throne room. Isaac directed his statues back to their original locations, as did Alex, and the door closed behind them. The ten of them spread out as they moved in, allowing everyone to move forward. Isaac moved in last, seeing three men opposite them: King Hydros, Lunpa, and a white-haired man with glasses who he did not recognize.

The king sat on his throne, looking much more exhausted than when Isaac had last seen him, while the other two stood to the side. Despite his appearance, though, when he spoke, his voice betrayed none of his fatigue. "Welcome, Adepts. I apologize for the unfortunate circumstances in which we initially met, but I again thank you for your help all the same. Felix, could you do the honors of introducing us all?"

Felix bowed slightly. "Of course, Your Highness." Turning towards them, Felix gestured out behind him. "King Hydros Proteus, ruler of Lemuria. Lord Conservato Le Verrier, Speaker of the Senate. And though you have already met, Lunpa Locksley, advisor to the king."

Felix turned around, facing the king again. "Your Highness, I present my fellow Valeans, Isaac Chayan and Garet Williams." Isaac bowed in the same manner Felix had, noticing Garet following his lead after a half-second.

When he picked his head back up, Felix continued. "Ivan Novikov and Master Hama Ashling, from the Hesperian city of Contigo." The siblings followed suit, though Isaac felt awkward and clumsy after seeing the grace of their bows.

"And lastly, Mia Magnarsen and Alex Ambrosen, healers from the Mercury Clan of Imil." Mia dipped into a curtsy at her name, while Alex dropped into a sweeping bow. Isaac raised an eyebrow as he caught Jenna's eye, unsure if the gesture had been contemptuous or sincere. Jenna merely shrugged.

"Welcome to my kingdom, all of you," Hydros said, bowing as well as he could from his throne. "I had hoped to speak with all of you concerning the threat Anemos poses, but I know you have learned that for yourself."

"How did you know about them?" Sheba asked. "Did Kraden send word?"

Lunpa shook his head. "The king recognized the hurricane as no natural phenomenon, but a powerful Jupiter attack. After some discussion, we realized for someone to have attacked us so precisely, they would have to know Lemuria even existed, yet Lemuria has been a myth for centuries now. As the only ancient civilization that simply went missing, the king rightfully assumed it to be the Anemoi."

"Then when you told Clotho that you'd heard of their attacks..." Jenna began.

Hydros nodded. "I had only my suspicions, though his appearance confirmed my original theory."

The man on the king's other side, Lord Conservato, cleared his throat gently. "I would like to say that I apologize for disbelieving you, sir."

"What a surprise," Jenna whispered rather loudly. Isaac covered his smile quickly; he had heard Jenna rant about the man countless times.

Conservato shot her a stern look, then turned back to the king. "I must admit, I was rather shocked to see His Highness Lycoris, as well. Had I not seen the resemblance, I might have discounted him as a fake."

"No, Conservato, you were right to doubt," Hydros said, shaking his head. "I only reached my conclusion by discounting all other more likely possibilities, and barely believed it myself."

Garet coughed.

Mia spun on him so fast that Isaac expected to feel the gust from the swirl of her clothes. Though he could not make out the words, he saw Mia begin whispering rapidly and furiously to Garet, her hands balled into fists at her side. Garet, for his part, shrunk back slightly, looking as he did when his own mother had berated him.

"Please, Miss Magnarsen," Hydros said, raising his hand. "Do not be angry with him. Lemurians often require a reminder that others do not view time as plentiful we do. I apologize for the distraction."

"What is it you wanted to speak with us about, then?" Felix asked, as Garet cautiously edged away from Mia.

"Though it was originally intended to be a warning, I would still like to pass on some information I have about the

Anemoi," Hydros said. "Firstly, about King Clotho Lycoris. What were your impressions of him?"

"He's an irritating son of a bitch," Jenna said instantly. "He needs to be stepped on. Repeatedly." A brief silence filled the room as everyone looked at Jenna, who simply shrugged. "You asked."

"He seemed unconcerned with anyone but himself," Isaac said, still fighting back a smile. "He thought very highly of himself, and completely ignored us until we joined in the fight."

"Even then, he appeared surprised that anyone save Your Highness stood up to him," Alex added.

"He had *wings,*" Garet said, looking around as if he could not believe that had not been said yet.

"He looked far too young for a king that, apparently, was alive before the sealing of Alchemy," Ivan said.

Hydros nodded. "I agree with your interpretations. Clotho is a prideful king, a powerful Adept, and a cruel man. He believes those outside of royalty are worth nothing, and this makes him incredibly dangerous. He will kill them without hesitation and little provocation."

"Then we'll have to deal with him in a place where he cannot use that ruthlessness to his advantage," Felix said. "Somewhere isolated from people, in other words."

"We'll need to think about ways to limit the effectiveness of his Jupiter Psynergy, as well," Hama said.

Alex frowned, shaking his head. "That will prove difficult. Jupiter has shown itself to be far more versatile than I

initially believed. Short of the area surrounding Venus Lighthouse, I can think of no setting that would prove useful. I will certainly think further on the matter, however," he added with a shrug.

"He will not be the only one, either," Hydros continued. "The city of Anemos is run by a council of three kings, each very long-lived and powerful. Clotho is but one of these. I do not know the others' positions, but I find it difficult to believe they would lead such a bold attack without agreement."

"Do you know anything about the other two?" Isaac asked. The little information they had gleaned from Clotho had already proven useful, but he would rather meet the other two kings with some idea of what he faced.

Unfortunately, it seemed that they would simply have to face them blind. "I'm afraid I'm not sure," Hydros said. "The kings I once knew have likely been succeeded, as it was with Clotho. I never expected the boy I met to grow into the monster I fought."

"How is he still so young, though?" Jenna asked. "Do they have something like your fountain?"

"They-" Hydros' words were cut off by a wracking cough that forced him forward, nearly falling from his throne. Lunpa and Conservato each moved to catch him, gently helping him back up. The king sat back against his throne, eyes closed and breathing heavily. After a few moments, he opened his eyes and tried to speak, but only a harsh rasp came. He closed his eyes again and gestured to Conservato.

The senator nodded and turned back towards the group. "Though we do not know the details, the Anemoi have some method of prolonging their lives almost indefinitely, similar to ourselves. However, only the royal families make use of

this near-immortality. Whether this is an inherent trait of their bloodlines, or simply a technology they restrict to the royalty, I cannot say."

"If Clotho is any indication, it's probably something they keep to themselves," Sheba muttered, folding her arms.

"Not necessarily," Lunpa said. "Think about it the other way: if these long lives were only attainable by the royal bloodlines, then this would create a separation between them and the commoners."

"That separation is already distinct," Conservato said. "Much like a Proxian's ability to assume a dragon form in times of dire need, the Anemoi can bestow themselves with wings, as you saw. However, these Wings of Anemos only appear in the royal bloodlines; no one else has them."

"From what I understand, though, the Anemoi are masters of technology," Alex asked after a short silence.

Conservato nodded. "It was from their designs that we built the ships most think of as Lemurian. As we built our first ones, however, they had already begun taking to the skies in their own."

"Then their technology is much more advanced than ours, I'm guessing," Garet said.

"You guess correct," Conservato said. "They have created incredible things, such as ways to communicate instantly over long distances, mechanisms that both create and operate using lightning, and a method of directing their Psynergy to far away places. As you all saw, they can use that to attack anywhere they desire."

"And by combining it with the endless power of Jupiter Lighthouse, they effectively turn the lighthouse into a Psynergetic trebuchet," Ivan said.

"Does Master Kraden still live?" Hydros asked suddenly, leaning forward.

Felix nodded. "He chose to remain behind in Tolbi, as they were also attacked."

"If you can get ahold of any Anemian technology, I recommend giving it to him," Hydros said. "I understand he has been working with applications of Alchemy? If anyone could, I would expect him to be capable of reverse-engineering their technology."

"Do you think that will help us stop them?" Sheba asked. "I mean, they still seem to be much more powerful than us."

"They would help," Isaac said, looking over at the girl. "Think about how difficult it is for us to communicate when we're separated right now. If we had their means of instant communication, though..."

Sheba shook her head. "It's going to take more than that, though. Even with all of us, at the moment, Alex is the only one who can fight them on an equal level."

"We've fought people stronger than us before, so we can do it again," Jenna said.

"No, she's right," Garet said. "The Proxians were trained for, what, a couple decades? These guys have *centuries* of training. Psynergy has become more natural to them than breathing or blinking. I could see it in Clotho when I faced him." He looked around at all of them, making sure to meet each of their eyes, then continued. "This isn't just a case of

matching their strength with our numbers. We need something else, some other way to tip the balance."

He ended with his gaze on Felix, and one by one each of the others turned their eyes towards the Venus Adept. Isaac cringed inwardly; Felix had not encountered Clotho. He likely believed Garet to simply be exaggerating the Anemian's strength, passing it off as another of Garet's stories. Isaac could feel the tension slowly build as Felix and Garet simply stared at each other, their faces expressionless.

Much to Isaac's surprise, though, after a few seconds, Felix nodded. "Did you have anything in mind?"

Garet paused, then shook his head. "I don't know of anything, no."

"In that case, allow me to suggest a few things." Pushing against the arms of his throne, Hydros slowly rose to his feet, despite protests from both Conservato and Lunpa. He grabbed a small, metal rod from beside the throne, using it to limp across the throne room. As he moved, Felix motioned for everyone to move aside, clearing a large, shimmering section of the floor.

Once he reached the edge, he stopped and tapped his steel cane against the floor twice. The shimmers swirled once, revealing themselves to be some sort of liquid, then began to flood with color. The colors spun and ran, twisting around before settling into the shape of the continents, revealing a map of the world.

"Liquids of different densities, all colored with different dyes," Hydros explained, smiling at Isaac's shocked expression. "The Anemoi aren't the only ones who breathe Psynergy." He then looked up at Felix. "Is this mostly

accurate? I tried to recreate the one you gave to me, but I must admit, they have all begun to blend together to me."

Felix glanced down for a few moments, scanning the map, then nodded. "Well enough that I understand it fine."

Hydros nodded, then looked around at them. "As you have said, your greatest disadvantage lies in the large disparity in your skills with Psynergy. Thus, your best chance lies in neutralizing their Psynergy as much as possible." He gestured with his cane to the lower right corner of the map. "Southeast of Lemuria lies the Apojii Archipelago. Are you familiar with these islands?"

"We've been there before, briefly," Felix said.

"Long ago, these islands were mined for a very rare material called Myrtle," Hydros explained. "This material was highly valued for its ability to completely negate all forms of Psynergy."

Isaac noticed Alex perk up slightly at this. "All Psynergy? No matter the intensity?"

"Complete nullification," Hydros said. "It saw much use, both as weapons and armor. With a full set of armor, the wearer would effectively render all opponents as normal humans."

"But wouldn't that also negate the wearer's own Psynergy, as well?" Alex asked.

Hydros shook his head. "So long as some portion of the body is exposed, the Adept is able to channel his own Psynergy through the gap. However, he would be incapable of using any on himself."

"Are any of these mines still standing?" Mia asked. "I've never heard of this material, so I imagine it has been lost for some time."

"You are correct," Hydros said. "With the sealing of Alchemy and the end of the wars, most of the pieces have vanished. Some are still likely held by people, passed down as heirlooms with no realization of the rarity the pieces hold. As to the mines themselves, I am not sure. It has been many centuries since I visited the Archipelago."

Ivan shrugged. "We can ask the locals about them. It's possible they don't even know what the mines were for. With so little Psynergy for so long, I imagine Myrtle hasn't exactly been in high demand."

"In addition to neutralizing their strengths, there may also be a way to overpower them." Hydros gestured with his cane again, this time to the very top of the map. "Legends from before even my time speak of a blade held by the Mars Clan of unparalleled power. They say the blade will one day bring about Armageddon, the end of the world."

"That...seems a bit counter-productive," Isaac said slowly.

Jenna looked over at him. "Really, Isaac? If using the sword destroys everything, then how would there be any legends about its power?"

He paused in thought, but before he could come up with a response, Ivan asked, "How do we know the sword even exists, though? You said yourself, Your Highness, that it has only been a legend, even to you."

Hydros smiled. "Legends begin for a reason, Lord Ivan. Was Anemos itself not a legend to you until recently?"

Ivan hesitated briefly, then nodded. "Yes, I suppose it was."

"Now think of how many other legends you have discovered to be truth on your travels," the king continued. "You already carry one of them with you here." He gestured to Piers, who Isaac had almost forgotten about in his silence. "Piers, I see you still hold Poseidon's Trident."

Piers smiled slightly, gently touching the Trident on his back. "I've grown a bit attached to it."

Felix snorted, but Hydros ignored him. "My point is that many legends are rooted in truth, if not entirely accurate. Seek out these powerful legends and utilize what you find to match the power of the legendary Anemoi."

"Do you have any other recommendations, great king?" Alex asked.

The Lemurian shook his head. "I can think of a hundred odd legends and stories, but none that would prove as useful to you as those."

Lunpa stepped forward. "I recommend speaking with Kraden on the subject. He keeps his ears quite open for such things."

Alex nodded. "I have come across some of my own that I believe warrant investigation, but as large a list as possible would be beneficial, as well. Thank you."

Sighing, Hydros said, "I believe that will be all the help I can give you, brave Adepts. Were I not injured, I would try my hardest to assist you in your fight, but my body is weak from so little use. I will take some time to recover."

"We understand, Your Highness," Felix said. "We thank you for all the help you have provided, though."

"No, Felix, thank you," Hydros said. "This is twice now that you have placed your lives on the line for the sake of Weyard. Rest assured, we will not forget it. Our memories last a very long time."

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"So. How are we doing this?"

Sheba looked around her at the others, all assembled in Lunpa's house once more, yet still separated. No matter how long they had all been together, when left to their own devices, they all seemed to gravitate towards their respective groups. Felix's had taken up opposite Isaac's, with Hama on the outskirts between them, and Alex entirely separate.

Sure, they blended well enough. Ivan had practically completed the trio with herself and Jenna, if a bit unwillingly. Mia had been quickly welcomed into the highly exclusive circle of Felix, which until then, held only Piers and Kraden. Isaac and Garet were already close friends to Felix and Jenna.

But the comfort zone remained. The two groups had simply spent more time with themselves, so they, especially the non-Valeans, continued to stick together.

"I think the initial plan for three groups would work best," Hama said, looking around. "If we plan on acting upon the information King Hydros gave, then we will have one group for each goal, with another to return news to Kraden."

Felix stood up. "Let's go over the goals, then. Firstly, we need a group to go to Prox and verify their safety. The seal should be broken by now, but we should check regardless. Mia, Piers, or Alex will have to go, in case the seal has not faded yet. Whoever goes can also look into this sword.

"Secondly, a group will sail to Apojii and begin investigating these mines. If they have collapsed, then we'll need myself or Isaac there to gain access."

"I could satisfy that requirement, as well," Alex said idly, but Felix made no acknowledgment that he heard the interruption.

"Should this Myrtle be found, they will then bring it to Yallam. There is a fantastic blacksmith there who specializes in rare materials.

"Lastly, the remainder will need to return to Tolbi and inform Kraden of our current plans. Once done, they will determine a suitable course of action, based on any information Kraden can provide." Felix paused and glanced around at all of them. "Any preferences?"

Alex raised his hand first, surprising Sheba. "I would like to return to Tolbi. I have several possibilities that I wish to hear Kraden's thoughts on."

"Tolbi also, please," Ivan said immediately.

"Me too," Sheba and Jenna said the next moment. The girls looked at each other, then at Ivan, who now looked slightly nervous.

To Sheba's dismay, though, Felix shook his head. "You and Ivan can't travel together, Sheba. I want a means of teleportation in every group, just in case."

Sheba opened her mouth to argue, but Mia cut her off. "I will go to Tolbi with them, instead. That should quell any questions anyone has about Alex's...motives."

Felix nodded, then looked at Piers. "That will leave you to come to Prox with me, then."

"Wait," Garet said. "If you both go to Prox, who's going to helm the *Kailani*?"

"Isaac can do it," Felix said, gesturing at the other Venus Adept. "He helmed your ship, didn't he?"

Garet snorted. "Never found out what happened to that ship, did you?"

Sheba raised her eyebrows, then turned to look at Isaac with the rest of the room. He seemed to be trying to shrink as much as possible, but unfortunately, his glowing red face drew their attention like a beacon. "I don't want to talk about that," he muttered quietly.

Felix turned to look at Mia, then Piers, then back at Isaac. "I guess I'll have to, then. Piers, I trust you'll take care of Prox. Who else is going?"

Silence filled the room. Sheba glanced around at the other unspoken names yet, finding them doing the same. She held no grudge against the Proxians, but still...Prox *was* rather unpleasant to visit, especially compared to Apojii. The silence went on, paradoxically growing in magnitude the way only silence can. After several seconds, Hama sighed and placed her hands on her knees, preparing to stand.

"I'll go."

The woman stopped and looked over at Isaac, along with Sheba. "The two of us should be enough," Isaac continued. "The rest of you can go with Felix. It'll make the trip easier on you, since you're using the ship."

Piers nodded. "I agree. If we need help finding this sword, we can always ask the Proxians for help. That way, if..." He trailed off as the door opened.

Sheba glanced over her shoulder and found Lunpa in the doorway. "Sorry, am I interrupting?"

Felix shook his head. "Not at all, Lunpa, this is your house. We're just finishing our decisions of how to split up."

Nodding, Lunpa said. "I see. In that case, Piers, the king would like to speak with you."

"I understand," the Lemurian said, then turned to Felix. "I'll try to keep it short."

"No," Felix said sternly. "So long as we're in Lemuria, take your time."

"Just...take normal people time," Jenna said, Felix's eyes instantly fixing on her. "What? You know how ridiculous *Lemurian* time is!"

Laughing, Piers walked towards the door. "Don't worry, while I'm not sure about *normal people* time,I've certainly become quite adjusted to *Jenna* time."

Lunpa stepped aside as Piers left, then turned to the others. "So sarcastic now. I blame you all."

"I blame that hellion right there," Felix said, jerking his thumb at his sister, who stood up in mock rage.

"A hellion? A *hellion?* Me? How dare you slander me so!"

As the young woman began a long-winded rant on her merits, as well as a fairly well-fabricated history of the word hellion, Sheba quietly moved towards the back of the room. When she felt certain that all eyes had focused on Jenna, she slipped up the stairs.

Moving quickly once out of sight, she crossed the upper floor, stepping outside onto the stone balcony. Scanning the path towards the palace, she picked out Piers' form with ease. She stepped to the edge, and after deciding that he had enough of a lead, she jumped down.

Wind curled beneath her, lightly depositing the girl on the ground, then swirled around her briefly as it left, caressing her softly. She let it go, then began walking after Piers.

Sheba allowed her attention to drift as she walked, already knowing Piers' destination. Though she dared not stray from the stone paths for fear of the Lemurians instantly swooping in on the ignorant foreigner, she eyed the grass curiously. No flowers of any sort seemed to grow in them, not even as much as the ever-present dandelion.

She glanced around her at other patches of grass, but found them all similarly empty. Thinking back to the few trees she had seen, she recalled no fruit or flowers on them, either. Did nothing grow here, save the most basic of plants? Did the Lemurians even know what flowers were?

As she walked up the steps towards the palace, she glanced behind her. Sure enough, she could see two separate Lemurians watch her as she walked, not even bothering to hide from her sight or make themselves look busy.

Shaking her head, she turned back around. She could not blame them for being suspicious, she supposed. That guard had said it well enough: whenever they showed up, the king seemed to get in trouble. If Clotho wanted Hydros dead, then he simply had to wait until they showed up again; she doubted it would take any longer than one more trip.

She chuckled at the thought, quickly stifling it as she approached the palace. The guards eyed her carefully, but she knew they would offer her no challenge. Word of her heritage had spread quickly, even for a community as humdrum as Lemuria, and all eyed her with some degree of fear now, despite Hydros himself vouching for her reliability. It stung, but she quickly realized that no one would challenge her movements anymore.

Only a single Lemurian was present in the palace when she entered, a young man, scrubbing at the floor with a thick brush. Beneath the foam she could still see the dark mark of Garet's flames, though it had faded partially, a shadow of the floor's design reappearing from the blackness. Judging by the sweat on the man's brow, however, the small victory had been hard-won. She wanted to stop and give some words of encouragement to the cleaner, who appeared only slightly older than her, but nothing came to mind; she would likely only remind him of who created his work.

Instead, she simply stepped around him in a wide circle and he paid her no attention, focused on his efforts. As she passed over another scorch mark, one borne of light, she could not help but notice how deep the burn seemed, appearing to have transformed the stone into a dulled onyx.

Upon reaching the first landing of the stairs, she slowed down and softly tiptoed up. When she poked her head onto

the next landing, however, she found the guards to the throne room staring at her. "Oh, um...hello."

Both guards grew visibly tense, their hands tightening around their spears. "The king is in a private audience with Piers. No one else is to be permitted attendance."

"Oh." Sheba pouted in her head. She wanted to know what Hydros had to say, but she doubted she could get past these two without both attracting Hydros' attention and probably getting herself thrown into a dungeon...assuming Lemuria even still had those. Maybe they used partially submerged dungeons; that would be rather uncomfortable.

After a moment she realized both guards were still staring at her. "Right. Sorry. I'll just wait for Piers downstairs, then."

Backing down the stairs slowly, she retreated to the great fountain and sat on the rim. Her hand idly dropped into the water, finding it pleasantly cool, contrasting the warm and muggy air. She ran her finger in a slow circle, distorting the constant ripples in the surface, and watched them rebound off one another. As she waited, though, she could feel the sweat forming and trickling down her skin.

The humidity was what bothered her, she realized. Lalivero raised her to be no stranger to heat, but theirs was a dry heat, baked by the sun with water often a precious resource. Here, they had so much water that they could use it as decoration.

She wondered if Lemurians ever went to the beach, if they even had beaches to visit, instead of rocky cliffs. There were only a few children here, she knew, but wouldn't they be the same as children everywhere, who almost always loved the beach?

Javen suddenly popped into her head, unbidden, but not unwanted. She remembered the first time they had taken him to the beach, at the onset of a particularly unpleasant summer. He had been thrilled to splash through the shallows, run through the small dunes of loose sand, and see all the various creatures and treasures of the tide. She had chased him up and down the beach, and he her, until they both collapsed into the sand.

Her other hand reached up to touch her seashell necklace, underneath her shirt. Javen had gathered up all manner of tiny seashells on that trip, and then made it into a necklace for her over the next few days. There had been considerable help from Zahara, of course, since Javen had only been four at the time, but that only made it more special and precious to her.

And it had been lying at home for two years. Two straight years, untouched. She had to pull her hand away as it automatically constricted in anger at the thought. She had missed so much of him growing up, so much of his flying hug tackles, so much of his bright laughter. Thoughts of Javen had been the only things that kept her hopeful during her captivity.

"Sheba?"

The girl glanced up, finding Piers on the stairs, heading down. She took a deep breath, releasing her anger, and smiled at him. It had all worked out better in the end, after all. "Figured I'd come and wait for you."

He raised an eyebrow as he reached the bottom. "Oh? Is that why the guards said you were sneaking up the stairs?"

She could feel her face flush red, try as she might to contain it. "Um...well..."

Piers laughed, reaching out and messing up her hair. "You're incorrigible, Sheba."

She stood up, drawing herself to her full height, and said, "I don't know what that means, so I'll just assume it means 'beautiful, amazing, goddess in human form.'"

"Yes, we'll go with that, Goddess of Eavesdropping."

"Hmph. Are you done yet? We do have a world to save, you know. Again."

Piers smile failed to reach his eyes this time, she noticed. "Just one more stop. It won't be long."

Once they were outside, a question returned to Sheba's head. "Hey, Piers, does Lemuria have any rule about walking on the grass?"

He glanced at her, then over at the slightly unkempt grass. "No, no one minds. We just tend to use the path unless we're in a hurry, and, well..."

"You're never in a hurry here," she finished, nodding. "Hey, hold on a second, then." Bending down, she reached down and pulled the laces of her boots free, loosening them until she could pull them off. Her socks came next, stuffed down into the soles of her boots, before they were slung over her shoulder. She wiggled her toes briefly, then stepped into the grass, relishing the way the cool blades gently tickled her feet. "Alright, let's go."

"I've never really walked around barefoot," Piers said after a few moments. "Do you do it often back home?"

Sheba shook her head. "Sand and stone usually get too hot to do it, and when it gets cool, the sand scorpions that hide

from the sun come out, so we're always in sandals, at least. Whenever we visit the oases, though, we get to take them off." She glanced over at his feet. "You should try it, too. It feels really nice, letting your feet free for a while."

Piers smiled at her, but shook his head. "Maybe some other time."

They continued on in silence for some time. Piers was hiding something, she knew, but had no idea what. It had something to do with what Hydros had spoken to him about, most likely, because he had been fine before his meeting.

His exile, she realized suddenly. It had only been lifted temporarily by the king for the discussion about the Anemoi, and with his emergency powers soon to expire, their exile would resume. Piers, for the second time, would be leaving his home without being able to return.

Sheba could not even begin to imagine what that would be like. Even her short time held from home nearly drove her crazy. To be banished forever, never able to see her family again?

She shook her head. Piers was trying to keep a strong front for their sake. He was willing to give it all up to help them save the world, so she would be strong for him as well. Pitying him and lamenting about it now would only hurt them all and possibly make his sacrifice worthless.

So when they arrived at Piers' house, she told him she would wait outside. She sat down in the grass, feeling the sun beat down on her and coat her face in sweat. Automatically, her hand moved to wipe it off, feeling her bangs stuck together in clumps of wet hair.

Taking a deep breath, she called a gentle breeze over her, enough to clear the muggy air from her nose and bring sweet, cool refreshment to her face. She relished in the air current for a few moments, feeling her hair flopping around, then fell back onto the grass. Her arms and legs fell outstretched, spreading out as far across the grass as possible.

She lay there for a while, staring up at the flawless blue sky. A pair of gulls drifted by on their own ocean above, sailing on the thermals. Her eyes followed them until they moved out of sight, headed for whatever port gulls seek.

It would be almost an hour before Piers returned, grim and determined, to walk them both back to Lunpa's, where they would all go their separate ways. Before that, though, Sheba gradually fell into a light nap, wondering if gulls ever worried about war.

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"Legends, you say?"

Jenna nodded, then sipped at her drink again. Sweet, steaming chocolate flowed down her throat, running like a waterfall of silk. She licked her lips and settled her face directly above the drink, breathing in the rich smells heavily. Too expensive and rare for all but lords to obtain, Kraden had promised he would always try and have some on hand for her. Babi's fortune could not *all* be used towards progress, he had told her.

Kraden leaned back in his chair, twirling the end of his beard thoughtfully. "I know of hundreds, possibly more. I haven't the faintest idea where to begin, really."

"Anything that could help us," Ivan said from behind herself and Mia, who sat in the pair of chairs.

Kraden rolled his eyes. "Yes, I gathered that much. What I mean, is, I don't know what will help you fight off several powerful Jupiter Adepts."

"The others are off searching for weapons, and armor," Alex said from the side of the desk. "I'm unsure how useful weapons will be against the Kings, though,"

Jenna nodded again. "I agree. I think the boys are just being boys again." A soft scoff reached her ears from behind her. "You don't count, Ivan. We corrupted you."

"Thanks for that. I feel the femininity saturating my mind."

Grinning, she continued. "But even so, we already have powerful weapons. Isaac's got his sword, Piers had his Trident, Alex has the Golden Sun. I think we need something else."

Kraden raised an eyebrow. "Such as?"

"Spirits," Jenna said, staring at Kraden intently.

The room fell into a brief silence. "Jenna," Mia said slowly, "are you saying that you want to chase ghosts?"

The girl shrugged. "Call them what you want, but Hydros had a point. How many unbelievable things have we seen already?"

"I agree, but...spirits? We've run into them before, and they've done nothing but attack us."

Alex shook his head. "I don't believe Jenna is speaking of the weak spirits created by stray Psynergy, but of sentient spirits that wander Weyard."

"Some have said the spirits of the gods themselves appear from time to time," Kraden said quietly, causing Jenna to look at him curiously. "Though it has never been confirmed, of course."

"What good would finding these spirits do, though?" Mia asked.

"Many spirits remain on Weyard because of unfinished business," Alex said. "We enter into an arrangement with them: should we help them with their business, then they help us with our task before moving on. That way, they remain bound to the world, giving them the motivation to assist us properly."

Ivan frowned. "That's terrible. You'd force them to stay here only to use them?"

Shrugging, Alex said, "Without our help, they won't be going anywhere at all. I don't think asking for a favor in return for dealing with their business is unreasonable."

"And if you broke your word and never let them pass on?" Ivan asked.

"Firstly, at the completion of the pact, they would be free to move on, regardless of my wishes," Alex said. "Secondly, there are few things more foolish than binding an unwilling soul to oneself. The dead have powers beyond Psynergy."

"What kind of spirits are there?" Mia asked.

"All kinds," Alex said, holding his hand up and raising counting off fingers. "Valukar, lord of the forge. Aeshma, lord of shadows. Pandora, lady of chaos. Deadbeard, lord of pirates." He looked at Jenna and smiled. "The Wise One, lord of Alchemy. They number in the hundreds, though most are likely simple stories. Some, though, have earned too many stories to be simply discarded as myths."

"I have heard several stories of Deadbeard," Ivan said softly. "He's said to endlessly sail the Karagol, searching for his lost love. He takes ships by force, carrying off their treasures as a gift for when they should meet again." He paused and swallowed. "He has no use for the living. Those on board are rumored to be given a choice: join his undead crew, or be slain."

"A bit melodramatic, but the basics are well-agreed upon," Alex said with a nod. "Undoubtedly powerful, enough to prove useful to our cause, yet scourge enough to be doing the world a favor by passing him on."

Jenna frowned in thought. How would Felix respond to such a proposal? He would weigh the risks and the rewards, she thought, calculating in the likelihood of success and failure, then add in the various possibilities for their plans to go awry. She, unfortunately, lacked the ability to view their ideas in such a detailed fashion. Though not stupid by any means, she feared that she had leaned on Felix too much in the past to properly make such a decision now.

Alex, however, had been doing this sort of thing for years, she suspected. And as he had not yet given them any reason to mistrust him since his initial truce, she saw no reason not to trust his judgment on the matter.

"Unfortunately, we have no vessel to seek him in," Alex finished.

Oh. Overlooking such an obvious detail made her feel rather foolish. Perhaps she should put a little thought into their plans, as well, instead of just blindly following Alex. She sipped at her chocolate again. "*We* don't," she said slowly, "but others do. We could always buy our way onto a ship here."

Ivan immediately shook his head. "You might be able to buy passage across the sea, but finding someone to purposely seek out Deadbeard? Nobody will do that."

"Perhaps we could enlist their help without mentioning Deadbeard, then," Alex said, shrugging.

Frowning again, Ivan said, "So now we lie to them and risk their lives at Deadbeard's sword."

Alex rolled his eyes. "As if there aren't already millions of lives at stake. This is a brainstorming session. I am speaking ideas as they come to me so that we can choose from them our plan. If you have other ideas, by all means, speak them. Else, stop criticizing every idea I suggest."

Ivan's face grew red, but Mia spoke up before he could. "How would we even go about finding him, though? Even if a ship would carry us to him, how would we guarantee he shows?"

Now Alex frowned. "I'm not sure. I may be overestimating his aggressiveness, if ships are still sailing regularly."

"I can send out some of my people," Kraden said. "It might take a few days, but they should be able to find anyone willing to search out this Deadbeard, as well as any ways to ensure his appearance."

"Several *days?"* Mia asked incredulously. "If so, I suggest we find some other course of action for the meantime. Sitting around and waiting is out of the question."

Kraden coughed quietly. "Actually...I have a small personal request. Concerning Aaron."

"Is he alright?" Jenna asked immediately. "He seemed fine when we got back."

"No, he's perfectly fine," Kraden said quickly. "But I think it best that he get home as soon as possible, especially if Garet won't be here. For one, he gets very...forlorn without his brother. For two, I imagine their parents are *quite* worried. I've sent messages to Kalay and Vault, but there is always the chance they never made it."

"I'd be more than happy to bring him back," Jenna said.

Ivan frowned. "Isaac has the lapis, so..." He trailed off, then glanced at Alex.

The man shrugged. "I have no objections to going with you. And though it will be tempting, I'll even refrain from eating all your children in the dead of night."

Jenna fought back a smile, mostly for Ivan's sake; the boy's face had gone red again, looking away from Alex. "Mia? Do you mind?"

She smiled, shaking her head. "I'd love to see everyone's families again."

Kraden nodded. "I'm glad to hear it. I don't expect to hear anything back until at least tomorrow, so if you wanted to spend the night in Vault, that would be fine, as well. Now, if you'll excuse me..." He stood up, pushing his chair in. "I

need to go speak to some people about these arrangements."

Jenna downed the last few sips of her chocolate, then placed the mug on the desk, standing as well. "I'll come with you, Kraden."

The old man looked at her, his face creased with suspicion. And wrinkles, as Jenna often reminded him. "Why? What are you up to?"

"Nothing," she said honestly. "But I've noticed that if I'm not with you, I have at least one of your alchemists following me everywhere. It's sort of annoying."

He rolled his eyes, then gestured for her to follow. "You have earned that reputation, you know."

"So do you think we'll be able to find Deadbeard?" Jenna asked as they walked.

"Difficult to say," Kraden said. "For one, Ivan is right – no one but the most foolish will seek out Deadbeard."

"Does that make us a ship of fools, then?"

"It does," Kraden said solemnly. "Deadbeard is highly feared for a reason, Jenna. You might be very skilled in Psynergy, but never forget that you're still mortal."

She shook her head. "No, I know, but we do have Alex, though, who can do pretty much anything."

"Then what would you do if Deadbeard had some of that material you mentioned earlier? Myrtle, was it?" Jenna frowned, but before she could think of something to say, Kraden coughed and continued. "Anyway, for two,

Deadbeard may be nothing more than an inherited name, passed down by pirates as they sail the Karagol. Normal pirates, mind you. It's possible that this 'Deadbeard' is no spirit at all."

"And then he probably wouldn't be any use to us," Jenna said, nodding. "I understand."

"I'm afraid to say it, Jenna, but I believe that might very well be the case," Kraden said. "I think this may just be a waste of your time."

Jenna looked over at him. "You don't really believe in the spirits, do you?"

He frowned. "I...think that people tend to exaggerate things they find incredible, and instead of attributing them to great ability or luck, they count them as supernatural."

Jenna nodded slowly, then said, "...Is what you *want* to say."

Kraden stopped at the top of the stairwell to his lab, looking at Jenna with an unreadable expression on his face. He motioned for her to wait, then stepped to the side, glancing down the stairs. Seeing no one on them, he turned back to Jenna. "When I was a boy, Jenna, I lived in a town beside a great forest. It extended for miles and miles, mostly untouched by explorers or settlers, save our village on the edge.

"People had become lost in the woods several times. It had no real landmarks in it, making it very difficult to navigate. No notable hills, no rivers, no breaks in the trees, no man-made paths. Absolutely nothing to work with. Sometimes the people returned, days later, a week later, two weeks later, telling us how they blindly stumbled back into the village. Some never returned.

"I don't remember what caused it, but one day, my parents yelled at me. I became angry, and as petulant children often do, I ran away from home."

"How old were you?" she asked.

"Very young," Kraden said. "Five. Perhaps six. Instead of taking the road to the next village, where I knew they would look for me, I decided to try and run away through the woods. Instead, I also became lost in them. I wandered for several days with nothing but my small canteen of water, no idea of how to get home or how to contact anyone."

He coughed again and continued. "I wandered through this forest, cold, hungry, thirsty, alone, and scared. I thought I would never see my parents again. However, when I woke up on what I thought would be the last of my days, I found a man sitting by me. He offered me some food and water and talked with me a bit, comforting me. When I finished eating, he asked if I felt ready to return home. I told him yes, and he pointed a finger towards the rising sun. He told me to walk in that direction for an hour, and I would be home again."

"And he was right?"

"He was. I returned home and apologized in tears to my parents, who held me as they cried themselves. Several year later, it finally occurred to me that, in asking me if I was ready to go back home, he might not have been talking about being lost. In fact, much later on, in Tolbi, I even came across a picture that brought the memory back as fresh as ever."

Jenna cocked her head to the side. "You figured out who he was?"

Kraden nodded. "At least, I believe I did. The picture was the most common depiction of Ulysses, God of Travels."

"Oh..." Jenna said quietly. "So you believe he came to you as a spirit, to help you back home?"

Shrugging, Kraden said, "I have no idea. I may very well have just attributed a chance encounter with a friendly traveler to supernatural events. However, ever since then, I've tried to maintain an open mind towards alternative explanations."

"So, what about Deadbeard?" Jenna asked.

Kraden shook his head, starting down the stairs. "I've given you my thoughts on him."

"What do you think we should do, then?"

"Jenna, you are possibly the most determined young lady I know," Kraden said, looking back with a smile. "Even if he turns out to be no help, I'm certain you'll find it somewhere."

Chapter 9: Secrets

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 9 – Secrets

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At the peak of the mountain, Ivan stood waiting. Wind whipped at hair that did not exist. The sun shone on skin that did not exist. A scene played out for eyes that did not exist. He knew his only role was to watch what would unfold, powerless to act.

In moments, Alex climbed onto the peak, standing triumphantly in the light of the morning sun. Ivan clenched the fists that did not exist, furious that they had been manipulated by the man, yet unsure of how any of them could have stopped him. He had simply placed them on a course they would willingly follow, then waited patiently for the end of the road.

The dream had come before. Ivan never knew if the events he saw actually occurred, or if his imagination had simply created a reasonable show for him. As he watched, the lights of the four beacons grew bright, showering the world with Alchemy once more. Their energies washed over Weyard, converging at the center point above Mount Aleph and forming a light far more radiant than any Ivan had ever seen, or ever would see.

The brilliance of the dawning sun shone upon the peak as Alex stood in the center, vanishing into the light. Ivan could feel the power of Weyard itself swirling around him, entering the world through its chosen gateway.

This time, though, the light did not simply fade. It did not vanish and leave an empty peak, save a boy that did not exist. Instead the light converged, drawing itself into a central point that grew brighter and brighter, becoming a newborn star.

As the light slowly dimmed around the new epicenter, the source revealed itself to be a sword that never fully lost its radiance, gently glowing at all times. Holding it above his head was not Alex any more, but Felix, his face set in its typical expression of grim determination.

Felix swung the blade down and Weyard itself trembled, the elements singing for him in a beautiful symphony. Ivan trembled as Felix strode by, sheathing the blade as he went, though the glorious incandescence continued to shine through the scabbard.

The man vanished over the edge, leaving hope behind in his wake, the one thing that did exist in the boy.

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Sheba burst into the main cabin of the *Kailani*, skidding around the corner as she turned to run the ship lengthwise. She ignored the questions hurled at her as the deck heaved again, dashing past the others and grabbing hold of the door handle as she flew by. Anchoring herself on it, she jerked herself to a stop and spun around. The door pulled open, greeting her with a thick sheet of rain as she leapt forward through it.

She crashed into the rail opposite the door, leaned over the side, and promptly vomited all over the wing below her. She grimaced slightly, spit, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, watching the rain wash it off. As she looked up, waiting to see if she would need to vomit again, the rain

pounded against her face, feeling incredibly soothing. Wind howled around her, snapping her loose clothing around.

After a few moments, she felt her nausea subsiding, so she turned around and walked back into the cabin. Felix and Hama sat at the table inside, while Garet sat against the wall, sharpening his weapons. All three sets of eyes were on her now. Glancing down, Sheba found her thin, warm-weather clothing soaked through completely, water dripping off and forming into a small puddle on the floor beneath her. "Can we get into the air now please?" she asked weakly, glancing back up at the others.

Felix nodded. "I was just thinking about doing it anyway. This storm got far worse than I expected, and very quickly."

Sheba felt his Psynergy ripple, then course through the boat around her, resonating with the Hover Jade kept down below. The synchronized ripple passed out to the wings, unfurling them, and though Sheba could not see them, she knew they would be gently glowing with all the colors of the rainbow on the undersides now, catching the latent Psynergy from Weyard itself.

The ship heaved again, and with it, her stomach. She groaned, clutching at it, and Felix said, "Sorry, almost there."

As the wings gathered the Psynergy, building it, she suddenly felt the rocking of the boat cease entirely – they were airborne. She breathed a sigh of relief, closing her eyes and leaning back against the door as the ship began to rise into the air.

"Come on," she heard Felix say, and opened her eyes again to find him standing in front of her. "You shouldn't hang around in wet clothes. You could get pneumonia."

She felt herself turn pink before saying, "It's still warm, though."

"Not warm enough. Go change."

Walking past him before she could turn any redder, she noticed Garet smirking at her from his spot against the wall. She stuck her tongue out at him, then continued on, walking the familiar path back to her room.

As she stepped inside and shut the door behind her, she glanced around her. Though all of her clothing and items she had gathered on their journey had been brought back to Lalivero, leaving the small cabin bare, it still emanated a certain comfort. Though not home, it felt like it.

Her bed sat on the far side, low to the ground and running the width of the room, though that said little of it. A pair of drawers were installed into the solid wood frame, secured shut by a small metal latch. On the walls to her side were a pair of footlockers on the floor, a clothesline strung up above them. The mirror she had fastened to the wall still hung there, thankfully unbroken by Piers' new crew members.

She set about pulling out a fresh set of clothes from her bed drawers before peeling off the wet ones, tossing them up on the clothesline. She threw her new clothes on, then jumped onto her bed, relishing the feeling of dry clothes.

When the knock came on her door, Sheba jerked suddenly. Had she fallen asleep? She must have, she realized; she remembered lying down on her side, facing the door, but now only the ceiling greeted her. "Come in," she called out, swinging her legs around to sit on the side of her bed.

The door opened and Felix stepped inside, ducking underneath her hanging clothes. "Are you feeling better?"

She nodded. "It's been a while since I've had to deal with it."

Felix shrugged. "You never had the greatest tolerance for it, anyway, especially not with seas as rough as these." He glanced around her room. "A lot emptier than it used to be."

"I didn't get the chance to pack much," she said defensively, looking around also. Her eyes and Felix's fell back on the hanging clothes at the same time, being the only thing present in the room, and she suddenly realized her underclothes were still hanging, as well. "Hey let's go for a walk!" she said quickly, jumping up and pushing him back out of the room, nearly catching his head on the clothesline as she went.

She pulled the door shut as Felix regained his balance. "Sheba, what-"

"I, um, think walking around will help me feel better," she said, fingering the hem of her shirt.

Felix frowned, then glanced towards the stairs. "Well, let's head back upstairs, then. I don't like the idea of flying blind through this storm with no one there."

Sheba cocked her head as they made their way back upstairs. "Where did Garet and Hama go?"

"To sleep," Felix said. "Hama took the mid watch, and Garet took the remainder of the night."

"Oh," Sheba said quietly, looking down. "Sorry. I didn't mean to dump my watch on you."

Felix waved his hand. "Don't worry about it. You're not feeling well right now, so I don't want you keeping yourself awake."

Sheba felt herself turning pink again and became thankful Felix was in front of her. She followed him in silence, patting down her hair with her fingers; it had gone astray while drying on her pillow, more confirmation that sleep had indeed claimed her. "How long was I asleep?" she asked.

"A few hours," Felix said. "Kraden's timepiece says it's been about six, but I can't see much outside to verify."

"*Six hours?*" she asked, her voice rising in surprise.

He nodded. "That's why I came to check on you, since we hadn't heard anything. You're feeling better now, right?"

"Well...yeah..."

"Then it was sleep well spent," he said, stepping into the main cabin and holding the door open for her.

Sheba shook her head. "I just...feel like a bit of a jerk, just going off and sleeping like that."

"I told you, it's fine. You were sick. You can make it up by making dinner tomorrow night, if you want."

She raised an eyebrow. "That seems like a terrible idea. Just saying."

Felix sat down at the table, smiling. "You can't avoid learning to cook forever, Sheba. Even Garet learned, something I never thought I'd see."

"I suppose. I just don't want to kill you all," she said, sitting down opposite him.

"I think we'll live," Felix said dryly. "We've survived some terrible food before."

Sheba giggled. "Like in Kimbobo."

Felix made a face. "That's exactly where I was thinking of, actually. Roasted spiders are my idea of a victory, not a feast."

The smile stayed on her face as she glanced around the cabin. It had changed little since their travels. Piers still kept the great bookshelf in one corner, bolted to the wall. The shelves even had small pieces of wood that slid into place to hold the books in. It never ceased to amaze Sheba how much ingenuity had been shown in the design of the boat. It seemed like every problem involved with life on an ocean had been thought of.

Beside the bookshelf hung a great map of Weyard, a beautifully painted and intricately detailed piece of art. Piers had it commissioned in Kalay on their way back to Lalivero, using all of the individual maps they had acquired or made for reference. Ivan had been able to get it for him at a great price, having known the painter for some time.

On the front wall of the cabin, between the two windows, hung Kraden's pride and joy, a great metal timepiece he had found in Loho. A metal pointer hung on a circular face, pointing to the time of day. It had made one full rotation every day since they'd gotten it, and as far as any of them could tell, it had not lost any accuracy. It helped out immensely during periods when they sky could not be seen, such as now. Felix still didn't trust it, though, something which amused Sheba to no end.

"Did you have something you wanted to talk about, Sheba?"

She looked back to Felix, feeling her stomach flip. "Um, what do you mean?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Well, you said you wanted to walk around, but as soon as we got here, you sat down and haven't moved since."

Her face began growing hot again and she kicked herself for letting it happen so easily. "Well...I just..."

Felix said nothing as she trailed off, simply staring at her with his usual neutral expression. Would dismissing the subject do any good? He would drop it, she knew. He had done it before whenever she got flustered. But should she even bother?

She wanted to say nothing, to simply brush the question off. Fear filled her heart at the very thought of answering him truthfully, because the topic she wanted to avoid so desperately constantly dwelled in her mind. She wiped her hands on her shorts, only to feel them grow sweaty again in seconds. If Felix could not hear the pounding of her heart, then he would have to be deaf.

The words began to push their way through her chest, ripping their way through the fear as it grew, threatening to burst her heart if she made no decision. They paused at her mouth, waiting for her command; though they might have come unbidden this far, they still needed her permission to pass. It would take only a small movement, just the opening of her mouth, and they would spill forth.

She took a breath.

"Felix, I-"

A reverberating crack ripped through the cabin as light flooded the windows, snapping like a whip. Sheba yelped and tried to jump backwards, but only succeeded in toppling over the chair. She and the chair fell together, her head

smashing into the floor before she bounced off the chair's back.

The bright lights flashing across her vision suddenly vanished to reveal Felix, crouched over her. "Are you alright?"

Sheba slowly sat up, helped by Felix, rubbing her head with her free hand and trying to alleviate the hammering inside. "Yeah, I'm fine. It just, um, surprised me."

Felix righted her chair, gently pushed her down onto it, then looked at her, holding up a finger in front of her eyes. "Follow my finger with your eyes only."

She nodded, then followed his instruction as he moved it to the sides, up and down, then sharply changed direction. Once satisfied, he dropped it and nodded. "What was that for?" she asked.

"Making sure you didn't have a head injury. You hit the floor fairly hard." He crossed his arms and frowned. "Sheba, lightning never surprises you."

Looking down, she shook her head and said, "I don't know, I guess I just wasn't paying attention."

"Sheba."

Slowly the girl looked up again, meeting Felix's stern gaze. His face was set, as if turned to stone, and she felt that his eyes might simply drill through her. She found herself slightly frightened and unconsciously shrank back in her chair.

Felix apparently realized this and his expression softened. He reached out, placing a hand on her shoulder gently, and

crouched slightly to bring his face level with hers. "Sheba, there are some things that you don't need to tell me for me to know. This is not one of them. I want to help you with whatever it is, but if you don't tell me, I can't."

Sheba opened her mouth, then closed it again. She couldn't tell Felix the truth. Not all of it, at least. If he had already been concerned about her when she had simply been seasick, then how would he take this? She wouldn't allow him to do any more for her. Better for him to not hear about all of it. "It's...ever since the attack, I've been...jumpy around lightning."

Understanding washed over Felix's face. "Because you were hurt by it."

She nodded. "At the time, I thought I was fine because, well, I could control it. When I redirected a bolt straight from the clouds, it hurt so much. I couldn't see, couldn't hear, and couldn't feel anything except pain all through my body. But it worked. I thought everything would be okay...until the beacon hit me full on." She shrugged. "And then I woke up a day later. You know that part."

"But why did it even surprise you?" Felix asked. "You can normally feel them building up, even if you're not paying attention."

Sheba shrugged again, forcing herself to maintain her gaze on him. "I'm not sure. I don't like thinking about it much, and I'm still a little out of it. Maybe that's why."

Felix frowned. "You should try keeping your senses open more. It will probably help you get used to the lightning again, as..." His brow furrowed in concentration suddenly, then his eyes widened. Wordlessly he grabbed Sheba and threw himself to the floor, pulling her on top of him. His boot

kicked the chair away just as something collided with the ship, sending the remaining chairs tumbling. The table, bolted to the floor, stood strong.

"What was that?" Sheba asked nervously. She could still hear the horrendous sound of teeth cracking open a bone ringing in her ears. The similar sound brought terrible images to her mind of what the boat looked like at the moment.

"A...a stalagmite," Felix said slowly, not moving. "In the ocean. In fact, there's hundreds of them."

Sheba could feel the ship slowing to a halt on Felix's command. For some reason, even while airborne, the ship's direction was still controlled by the tiller outside; Psynergy did nothing. She always felt that a stupid decision on the part of whoever designed the boat – the Anemoi, she now knew.

After a few seconds, she realized that she was still laying on top of Felix. Pushing herself up, she held out a hand to help him to his feet, as well. "Where are we?"

Felix shook his head. "I'm not sure. I'm going to head outside and look."

He stopped by the door long enough to grab one of the large raincoats and throw it around himself, then stepped outside into the rain. Sheba moved to one of the small windows, watching him move up the right side of the boat, then down the left, looking over the side. Once he finished, he moved to the tiller and spun it, then began moving the boat again.

"What the hell's going on?"

Sheba glanced back to find Garet running into the cabin, Hama entering a few seconds later. "We hit some rock. Felix is checking everything out right now," she added, turning back to the window.

"He's figured something out," she heard Hama say. "We're moving down."

Sheba paused in her thoughts and reached out mentally, feeling the flow of Psynergy around her. Sure enough, Felix was dispelling the gathered energy in the wings, bringing them back to the surface. A shiver ran up her spine as she realized what would happen if they dropped a broken boat into the ocean, but before she could even leave the window to speak to Felix, she felt the ship shake again, though gentler this time.

"Dammit, now what is it?" Garet asked.

"I think..." Sheba suddenly realized why Felix would have dropped them. "...I think we found land."

As she watched, Felix walked around the boat in reverse, checking the sides, then returned to the cabin. "Alright. Slight change in plans. We're waiting here until the storm passes."

"Sheba said we hit a rock?" Hama asked, raising an eyebrow.

He nodded. "I was flying us low, not really expecting anything out here. Apparently, though, this island is surrounded by giant stone spires jutting up from the shallows. We, well, hit one. I want to take a look at the hull and see what kind of damage we have, and I also don't want to fly in this storm anymore, so we're staying here until it clears."

Garet sighed, saying, "Great. Should have figured the plan was too smooth."

"Luckily, we have a flying ship," Felix said, looking at Garet. "Our propulsion and flight are unaffected, so at worst, we wind up having to fly the rest of the way. We should be able to get repairs done in Apojii." He turned from him to Hama. "We won't need a watch tonight. I'll sleep in here in the off-chance someone shows up, but I don't expect it. Go ahead and get some sleep. We're going to need significantly more energy to fly this entire trip."

He looked at Sheba next, who nodded. "I'll stay here with you."

Felix shook his head, though. "I'm going to sleep as well, Sheba. You should see if you can get some more."

She opened her mouth to protest, then stopped. He was right, after all. Instead, she simply nodded and watched as he set a chair against the door, to fall should someone come in. Once he finished, she followed Garet and Hama back to their rooms.

As she closed her door once more, she wondered if he could tell she was hiding something from him. Could that have been the real reason he sent her away, masked by his usual rationality?

She shook her head. Felix would not have done that, even if he did suspect something. He had a cruel side, to be sure, but he only bared it to enemies. He simply didn't have any use for her at the moment.

Sheba leaned against her door, a humorless chuckle escaping her lips. Who could blame him? After all, when a

Jupiter Adept could no longer so much as sense lightning, her own element, what use could she be?

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The wind, rain, and thunder blew fiercely for the remainder of the night, but as dawn broke, so did the storm. Felix woke from his slumber to the peaceful silence of the main cabin, free of the ceaseless pattering on the roof that he had fallen asleep to.

He sat up on the floor, throwing his blanket aside as he stretched, feeling the soreness in his limbs burn as they begin their therapy. The thought briefly crossed his mind of getting a cot in the cabin, for situations like this, but pushed it aside; he would want to run it by Piers first, and he doubted they would find a cot here anyway.

As he stood up, he heard quiet voices from the other end of the cabin, around the wall that separated the two halves. Curious, he rolled up his blanket and grabbed his pillow, placing them on the bench against the forward bulkhead, then grabbed the chair from the door and returned it to the table on his way across the cabin.

On the other side he found Sheba and Garet, both leaning over a steaming pot in the makeshift kitchen Piers had created. He had pulled up some of the floorboards in order to install a large stone fire pit there, giving them access to hot meals while at sea. It had taken a long time to convince him to allow it, and many stern lectures to Jenna about never leaving a fire there untended, but he finally agreed. The first few weeks had been nervewracking for the sailor, knowingly allowing a fire to be used on a wooden ship, but he eventually became comfortable with the idea.

"Here, you don't want a lot of pepper," Garet said, handing the bottle of the spice to Sheba. Beneath the pot, a small fire was burning, easily controlled by the Mars Adept. Judging from the sack off to the side on the floor, he guessed they were potatoes. "A small amount goes a long way. Too much, and the only thing you'll taste is the pepper."

The girl held up the glass bottle, then peered into the pot. Both she and Garet had donned aprons, stained with the use and experimentation of people bored at sea. "How do I know how much is too much, though?"

"In general, if you're not sure, add a very small amount," Garet said, motioning a very short tip of the bottle with his hand. "You can always add more, but whatever you've added is there for good. There's no way to get it back."

She frowned. "Couldn't you just add more potatoes, to spread out the extra pepper?"

Garet looked at the pot thoughtfully for a moment, then shrugged. "I suppose that would work also, but then you just wind up with more food. Also, you might not always have all the ingredients you need to do something like that. A lot of things require very specific amounts. Messing it up can ruin the food. Like cake."

Sheba giggled. "You sound like you know that from experience."

"It was terrible," the man said. "It was for Ivan's birthday, too. The poor guy tried to push his way through it without saying anything, but after I took a bite, I set it on fire." He wagged his finger at Sheba. "Another lesson in there: always taste your food before giving it to someone. Preferably while making it."

Nodding, Sheba slowly held out the pepper, gently tapping it on the side to drop some into the pot. It took a few taps before any actually fell, but once it did, she quickly withdrew the bottle, looking at Garet fearfully. "Is that too much?"

He peered into the pot, then shook his head. "It looks alright. Maybe short a bit, but we can check it after we stir it up some. Careful not to burn yourself, now."

Sheba grabbed the wooden spoon he held out to her and lowered it into the pot, stirring up the concoction inside. As she mixed, she glanced up and saw Felix leaning against the wall. "Wah!" she shouted, jumping and letting the spoon clatter against the rim of the pot. "Felix! When did you get there?"

He smiled. "A couple minutes ago. I just didn't want to interrupt the lesson."

"Don't do that!" she said, stomping her foot. "Do you know how creepy that is? Make some noise or something when you walk in!"

"You looked so focused, I doubt you would have noticed, anyway." He stepped forward, craning his neck to peer into the pot. "What're you making?"

Sheba lunged forward, covering the pot with her arms. "No! You're not allowed to look before its done!"

He raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. "If you say so. I'll go take a look at the hull, then, and see what we're dealing with."

Garet nodded. "It should be another, oh, twenty minutes, so no rush."

"Alright." Felix turned around to leave, then stopped again. "Has Hama woken up yet?"

"Hama has."

Felix turned towards the door to the lower decks, finding Hama standing in it, fully dressed and with a frown on her face. "Good morning," he said with a nod.

She returned it. "Good morning. If you don't mind, Felix, I'd like to come with you."

"That's fine," Felix said with a shrug. "Did you want to see something in particular?"

"I hope not," she said. "Last night I had a dream. There's danger on this island."

The quiet mutterings from Garet and Sheba about the food fell silent, the crackling of the flames now filling the cabin. Felix recalled the last time he had heard about a dream of impending danger – on his way to Tolbi with Ivan. "Are you positive? There was a storm last night, so if you saw it in your dream..."

She shook her head. "Dream symbols are often specific to the person. I know lightning represents danger to my brother, but not to me. No, what I saw was clearly a vision of danger. We must be careful."

"Then let's go," Felix said. "If there's danger here, I want to leave as soon as possible." He looked back at Garet and Sheba. "If we're not back in fifteen minutes, get into the air, then check the island. Do not open that door until the ship is airborne. Do you understand?"

Garet frowned, but nodded. "If we made all this food only for something to eat you two, I'll find a way to bring you back to life so I can beat the crap out of you. Got it?"

Felix smiled and nodded also. Hama crossed the cabin towards him, and together they walked to the door. When Felix opened it, the sudden rush of sunlight burned his eyes. Squinting and raising a hand to shield them, he stepped onto the deck and paused, letting his eyes adjust.

"What a contrast to yesterday," Hama muttered.

Felix merely grunted in response, feeling the same way. Once he could see again, he walked to the edge and threw down the rope ladder. He mentally grabbed the metal hook on the bottom, sliding it into its eyelet to secure it in place, then started down with Hama following. After they had both landed on the beach, he unhooked and repelled the hook back up with a wave of his hand, sending the ladder with it.

Satisfied with his precaution, he and Hama began to walk the length of the ship, looking at the hull. As they crossed to the port side, Felix immediately groaned.

Piers was going to *kill* him.

He cleared the white sand away to get a better look, but his initial glance had been enough. An enormous gash ran almost the entire length of the hull, though thankfully, the second layer of the hull remained intact. The bright sunlight let him see clearly into the void, where several support beams had been shattered. Luckily, the remainder still held the two hulls apart – without the layer of air, the ship would not even float.

He was even able to pick out the point where the hardwood turned into the stone chamber that controlled the ship's

propulsion, the real reason for the double hull. A standard wooden hull could not keep such a structure afloat, but from what Piers had said, a stone container was required for the alchemy tool that the ship used. It also doubled as far more durable protection for the complex tool in situations like these, for which Felix was grateful.

"Felix..."

Tearing his eyes away from the hull, he glanced back at Hama, who was not even looking at the great wound. Instead, he followed her gaze further inland where he saw a small plateau, ringed by sharp cliffs. The small beach died off on either side of the plateau, leaving the water to crash against the rocks.

But the plateau itself held no interest to Felix. His eyes, like Hama's, were drawn to an opening in the cliffs facing them, like the mouth of a statue, permanently fixed open. The two shared a brief, silent glance, then walked across the sand to the cave opening. Felix peered into the mouth, but the darkness veiled all, save one thing.

"Stairs," he said softly, tapping the first with his foot. "This is man-made."

"Made by man, perhaps, but who uses it now?" Hama wondered.

Felix frowned, gazing down into the darkness. "The danger you saw, Hama...was it significant?"

"Difficult to say," she said, shaking her head. "I only saw danger, not death, which leads me to believe we are capable of overcoming whatever threat is posed...or perhaps simply capable of fleeing."

Tapping his foot against the sand, Felix weighed his options. If they turned and left, he suspected whatever danger awaited them would be left behind. However, if his suspicions about the cave were correct... "Back to the boat," he said finally. "At the very least, we need to check in with the others."

They found Garet and Sheba just setting out the food when they arrived. The girl quickly ushered them into their seats, serving up a hot bowl of mashed potatoes, mixed with small pieces of jerky, garlic, and cheese.

Much to Felix's surprise, he found the meal rather good, though he suspected Sheba had been more of Garet's puppet than his pupil. He left that part out when he told her, however. He doubted he would have gotten such a radiant smile with *that* comment.

Once they had finished, he set aside his bowl and folded his hands. "We found a cave on the beach, with stairs leading down into it."

"Stairs?" Garet asked. "Here? There's nothing around!"

"Not anymore," Felix said. "All those spires around us? They were caused by shifts in Weyard's land. Around here, the land beneath the water collided, shattering the island and forcing pieces of it upwards in sharp bursts. This is all that's left."

"What's in the cave?" Sheba asked.

Felix shook his head. "I'm not sure. I can't see anything. However, I suspect it might be one of the mines we're looking for."

Garet snorted. "That would be convenient. Didn't Hama say she saw danger here, though?"

"I believe the danger can be overcome, provided we are cautious," Hama said. "My dream was clear, but lacked the signs that accompany mortal danger."

Felix nodded. "I'd like to take Hama to investigate for a short bit and see what we-"

"We're going with you," Sheba said calmly.

"-can find. What?"

"You heard her," Garet said, leaning back in his chair. "Come on, Felix, you think we're just going to let you guys walk in there without us? We came to find that Myrtle, too."

Sheba suddenly giggled. "You've got that frown on your face again. The one that you get when trying to think of a reason to tell us no."

Felix consciously neutralized his face, then said, "You're still injured, Garet, and I'd rather we had people here in case-"

"Oh, hang it, Felix," Garet said. "I've got awesome recovery time, I'm fine now. And even if you tell us no, we're just going to follow you in. You can't exactly lock us in here. Or me in anywhere, for that matter." He leaned forward, placing his hands on the table and staring Felix in the eyes. "So what'll it be?"

Fifteen minutes later all four Adepts stood outside the cave's entrance, staring down the narrow opening. Felix gingerly placed a hand on the cave wall, trying to feel out the shape. "It winds down, then opens up into a larger cavern. I can't really feel anything after that."

Garet held up a hand, a bright glow enveloping it and casting a steady light onto the staircase. "Then let's go find out." Without waiting for a response, he turned and started down the stairs. Hama looked up at Felix, shrugged, and followed after him.

Felix shook his head, sighing. "Don't be mad at him," Sheba said quietly, poking him. "He just wants to get out of here, too. Hama's scaring him a bit with her visions."

"I'd save your sympathy for her; she's the one who sees them," Felix murmured, then gestured for Sheba to go next. "Let's not fall behind."

The stairs began at a slow decline, but quickly became steep, threatening to turn any misstep into a deadly tumble. Garet began dropping flames ahead of them, dousing his light and bracing himself against the walls with both hands. In that aspect they were lucky, Felix supposed, since the stairwell would not have even fit Sheba and Ivan side-by-side.

For several minutes they continued their slow and steady descent, the air growing cool around them. Glancing back, the opening to the cave seemed to give no more light than the full moon, surrounded by the black of night. Felix shook his head and turned forward again. Vigilance.

"Hey, it's opening up," Garet called.

Felix shook his head, then realized no one could see him. "The cavern is further down. The path will narrow again."

Garet cursed quietly, though his voice echoed up clearly. Despite his words, though, Felix still felt a small sliver of comfort at the open area. Even though he knew himself

more than capable of going straight to the surface through all this rock, he still found the tight passage disquieting.

Hama had paused, examining a series of pillars placed in the space, possibly to support the roof. "These are old," she said. "Old, but sturdy, and well-made."

Felix stepped over to them and looked them up and down. With no wind or water to wear them down, the simple carvings had survived in near-perfect form. "Not well-made enough, apparently," he said, gesturing at a shattered pillar in the corner. He glanced around, finding the passage down. "Hundreds of years will do that, though. Let's keep going."

The remaining descent took another ten minutes, during which Sheba's foot slipped. Her sharp cry instantly caused Garet to brace himself against the wall, ready to support both Sheba and Hama's weight, but Felix's hand snatched out first, grabbing her upper arm and allowing her to find her feet once more.

When they stepped into the open cavern at last, Felix's initial description spared them no amazement. Garet raised his hand high, flaring his light brightly, but still the opposite wall could not be seen, nor the chamber's ceiling. Water filled a good portion of the cavern, flowing slowly from some source to their right, before draining down further into the earth to their left. More pillars had been constructed here, stretching far up into the shadows above their heads.

A small scratching reached Felix's ears as Garet illuminated their surroundings. His hand dropped to the hilt of his sword as he spun to the left, stepping out to cover the others. Before he could draw his blade, though, he spotted the source of the noise – an oversized, lumpy, misshapen bug,

scuttling away from them. Glancing around, he saw others similarly fleeing them, their black eyes glancing back briefly.

"They dislike the light," Hama said softly. "They've forgotten what light is, and it hurts them. Dim your glow, Garet."

He glanced back at her warily. "I doubt bugs are the only things who don't like light," he said, but the aura shrunk nonetheless.

"It's beautiful," Sheba whispered, glancing around. "Listen. The only thing you can hear now is the gentle flow of the water."

They all stood in silence for a moment, and to Felix's surprise, Sheba was right. With the sound of the bugs gone, nothing else could be heard. Even his Psynergy turned up nothing but the scuttling of distant bugs. If anything awaited them in the darkness, it awaited them with a patient silence.

"Well, are we going?" Garet asked after a minute. "Caves aren't really anything new to us, y'know."

Sheba scoffed in irritation. "You're unbelievable Garet."

He shrugged. "I am who I am."

"He's right, though," Felix said. "We should keep moving."

"That would be a sound plan," Hama said, then gestured around them with a sweep of her hand, "if it weren't for that."

Felix followed her gaze and saw her meaning: the stairs had deposited them on a small rise of land, but the only things surrounding them were rock walls and water. No paths

continued them further into the cave. He walked as far as he could, standing upon the water's edge and looked around.

They could continue, he realized. By shifting the stone and raising walkways, they could advance further and explore deeper, even without a Mercury Adept to move the water. But at what cost? Their movement would be restricted, with little hope of fighting their way back out of the water should they be attacked. Danger lurked on that path.

"She's right," he said finally. "We've come as far as we can. I don't want to push any further."

Sheba groaned. "So much for finding some Myrtle quickly." She turned back to the stairs with Garet, following him. Hama cast another glance around the cave, then turned back also.

Felix sighed, both in relief and disappointment. He turned his head up towards the black ceiling and muttered, "Keep your secrets, then." He closed his eyes and dropped his head down, shaking it briefly.

"Felix, are you coming or not?"

He snorted, opening his eyes at Sheba's voice. "Yes, I'm..." His words trailed off as he stared at the ground below him, noticing the unusual settling of dirt in a series of circles. How had they all missed this?

"Felix?"

Hama now, walking back towards him. With his foot he brushed aside some dirt, revealing smooth, white stone beneath it. Another brush revealed lines carved into the stone, showing the patterns that the dirt had hinted

towards. A wave of his hand sent the dirt flying from the pattern, exposing the stone completely.

A rune of teleportation.

"No way..." Garet whispered, stepping to the edge of the circular engraving. "All the way out here?"

"If that's not a sign to follow, then I'm a dirge," Sheba said in an equally awed voice.

"Is that wise?" Hama asked. "If we use it, then we'll be stuck wherever it leads until the sickness subsides."

Felix shook his head. "Runes bypass everything. I believe the sickness comes from the act of guiding the teleportation, but the runes do that for us. If we don't like where we wind up, we can turn around and leave a moment later."

He turned and stepped off to the side, beckoning the others in. They all linked hands in a circle around the center, then paused as Felix turned to Sheba.

The girl looked up at him, hesitation in her expression. "Are you sure?"

Felix glanced at Garet, who nodded, then at Hama, who paused briefly, but nodded nonetheless. He turned back to Sheba and nodded as well.

Sheba took a deep breath. "Okay. Here we go."

Closing her eyes, Psynergy pulsed from the girl and the rune responded, a soft purple light pouring from the carved lines. As it grew brighter, Felix felt his body grow lighter and lighter, until finally, it vanished entirely.

Another door stood in front of them.

"You've got to be *kidding* me," Garet said, dropping his head in frustration. "This is the fifth door in this damn mine shaft. How many more can there possibly be?"

Felix held his hand to the wall, staring at the door. "None, actually. This is it. The passage opens beyond this door and ends."

"Good," Garet said, raising his hand-turned-torch high and grabbing the handle with the other. "Then let's go in, look around, and get out."

The others nodded, so he threw open the door, glancing into the chamber. The light created a path through the frame of the door which Garet followed, stepping inside. The chamber was far smaller than the cavern they had encountered before, not even large enough to escape Garet's light; he could see the walls on both sides, curving around in a circular shape. His light fell upon a pair of unlit stone torches, built into the floor, so he threw flames at them, igniting both lamps.

The fresh light illuminated another pair of torches, as well as a set of stairs beyond them, but before Garet could ignite those as well, a stirring from above the stairs caught his eye. Something in the shadows shifted and Garet stopped, his hand slowly moving towards his sword. As he watched, two dull points of light appeared, reflections of the firelight. Eyes, he realized.

In the next moment, the shadows leapt at him. He threw himself aside, feeling a cool rush of air as the creature passed, the flapping of wings reaching his ears. When he

stood up again, he realized both torches had been extinguished, plunging them back into darkness.

"Garet! Are you all right?" Felix called.

"Fine!" he shouted back. "This thing doesn't like fire, I guess. Let's see it put this out!" Spreading his arms, Garet loosed fire freely with his mind, swinging it in wide arcs in every direction but towards the doorway, where it sounded like the others still stood. Great whips of flame slashed through the air before dropping to the ground and continuing to burn, lighting up the chamber once more.

With light returned, Garet scanned around him, slowly stepping backwards to keep his back to the wall. Across the chamber, he saw a shadowed figure dart around his fire, jumping from shadow to shadow, but before he could attack, a rush of air caught him from above. He glanced up just in time to see the beast swoop at him from the air, a mess of yellowed teeth and dark skin. Drawing his blade as he stepped to the side, he swung up at the monster blindly.

He felt his sword bite into flesh, accompanied by a roaring shriek, but then felt something thick and powerful slam into his chest, throwing him to the ground. As the creature took to the air again, he felt a cold breeze move past him, and he saw his flames suddenly die out in the direction it had flown.

The sound of flapping wings carried in the chamber again, followed by the snuffing of his remaining flames. He stood back up, shouting, "I don't think so, bastard!"

"Garet, stop!"

The Mars Adept stilled his Psynergy, recognizing Hama's voice. But...why was she over by the stairs? "What are you doing, Hama?"

He heard a loud crash in the center of the chamber as the beast landed, with Hama's voice following. "It hunts in darkness and will just keep attacking the source of the light."

"So you want to let it fight in its own element?" Felix asked.

"No, I plan on distracting it in mine," she called out. "When I say to, brighten the room and attack it."

In the darkness he heard the creature shuffle along the ground, heading in his direction, but at some obvious movement from Hama, it changed courses and moved for her, instead. Garet felt his heart leap into his throat; what in the hell could Hama possibly have planned? How was she going to distract this thing and live if she couldn't even see her own hands?

"Garet! Come here!"

Sheba's whisper pierced through the darkness, and for one terrifying, silent moment, Garet thought the creature would turn back. In the next, though, he heard a crash from the other side, and used the sound to cover his movement. He fumbled along the wall until his hand landed on someone's clothes – Felix's, he realized after a moment.

"Quiet," the man breathed, then grabbed his hand. "Look."

Garet felt Jupiter enter his mind, as if someone had exhaled on his brain itself, and the cave began to reappear in gray tones. On the opposite side, near the stairs, he could see the creature itself, dimly glowing blue. Its body was thickly muscled, with a pair of wings bunched up along its back as it swung and snapped at the shimmering purple blur before it. The light surrounding Hama made her exact actions difficult to read, but he could clearly see her practically

dancing through the monster's strikes from claw, tail, and teeth.

"She's amazing..." Sheba breathed, and Garet could not help but agree. The woman carried no weapon, but still somehow struck back against the creature with enough force to send the massive beast recoiling, only to duck and twist through its counterattack to strike again. What surprised him the most, however, was the complete lack of Psynergy coming from her, passive or active. He could see its potential brimming around her, but it never once pulsed.

"It's an ice dragon," Felix said quietly.

Garet nodded. "A small one, but yeah. That's how it keeps putting out the flames."

"Then here's what we'll do," Felix said. "At Hama's signal, don't use any fire, just create as large a light as possible, then hold it. Sheba, when it goes after Garet, you paralyze it. I'll trap it with spires, then you incinerate it, Garet. Got it?"

Sheba opened her mouth to say something, but a sharp crack drew their attention, sounding nothing like the previous stone impacts. The girl squeaked and the revealing eye faded, but Garet realized he could still see, though now in shades of purple instead of gray. Hama stood at the base of the stairs, bolt after bolt of lightning streaming from her fingers, pushing the dragon into the center of the room once more.

The pulses of light came so frequently that it seemed like a series of pictures. It reminded Garet of a bunch of drawings he had drawn once in the corner of one of Kraden's book, blending them into one continuous movement by flipping through all of them quickly. The dragon's roar pulled him

back as he remembered the plan, though he doubted the light he could generate could surpass the pain such bright flashes were causing.

Not willing to adjust it for such a reason, though, he pulled together the warmth from the lingering embers, holding up his hand and converting it to light. The room burst into continuous view as a yellow glow filled it, dawning above Garet's head as Felix and Sheba ran around to the right side. He saw Hama quickly shield her eyes as her attack ceased, but the dragon immediately abandoned her, spinning around.

This time, Garet saw the creature clearly. Black eyes stared at him from above an enormous jaw, large enough to fit his entire head into with ease. A pair of green horns sprouted from the top of the skull, a stark contrast to the deep blue of the rest of the dragon's hide, save for the membrane of the wings. The dragon spread those as it took to flight again, charging him with another furious roar.

Garet stood his ground, holding the light high unflinchingly, waiting on Sheba. Instead of being paralyzed, though, the dragon suddenly spiraled off course, careening into the chamber's left wall. Recognizing the lingering remains of Jupiter Psynergy, Garet dropped his hand as he spun towards Sheba, shouting, "What are you doing? You need to-
"

Another roar cut through his words. Too late, he realized, he had let his own body block the light from the dragon, leaving it to focus its simple mind on the most recent threat. He raised his hand again as the creature pushed off the wall, rocketing towards the young girl with enough force to tear through a stone wall.

Garet screamed, pulling together flames to stop it, but he knew already he could never reach the dragon in time, not at that speed. Sheba stepped back, raising her hand to summon another burst of wind, but he knew she would be similarly unable to divert that much momentum.

His eyes caught a brief glimmer of reflected light from the other side of the dragon, his flames only beginning to materialize, but in the next moment, the dragon had changed directions faster than Garet knew possible, instantly turning aside and smashing into the wall about halfway between himself and Sheba. He waited a moment, but the dragon remained suspended on the wall, unmoving.

As he walked out into the middle of the room, raising his glowing hand again, he saw a familiar sword pierced through the dragon's skull, pinning it to the stone. As he watched, a phenomenally high concentration of pure Venus energy began to dissipate from around the sword, originally so thick that he could see the yellow glow with his regular eyes.

Turning around again, he saw Felix standing beside Hama, one hand on an empty scabbard, the other still outstretched. As the tension in the chamber subsided, he dropped his hand and propped himself up with his hands on his knees, breathing heavily. Garet understood his exhaustion. The pure, concentrated forms of the elements required significant effort to control, especially at such a moment's notice.

As Hama helped support Felix, Garet rounded on Sheba. "What the hell was that?" He saw Felix try and raise a hand to stop him, but figured he might as well get in as much as he could before the man could recover enough energy to speak. "We had a plan for a reason, Sheba! I was counting on you to stick to it, not try and change it without saying

anything! I could have been hurt! You could have been *killed!*"

The girl shrunk back, looking down at the ground. "I'm sorry, Garet! I just... I..."

"You what?" he shouted, feeling his anger grow as he approached. "What if Felix had missed? Do you understand what that dragon would have done to you? Why the hell didn't you paralyze it?"

As she backed up against the wall, Garet followed, looming over her. He slammed his fist into the wall above her, needing to hit something, and shouted, "Answer me!"

Sheba looked up at him, tears just beginning to spill from the corners of her eyes. At the same time, he felt a hand settle on his shoulder, pulling him back. "Calm yourself, Garet."

He turned back around to Hama, shrugging her hand off. "Fighting a damned *dragon* is not the time to change the way we do things. She needs to understand this."

"And you need to understand that shouting like this isn't going to make the situation any better," she said quietly. "She frightened you, which made you angry, and rightfully so, but screaming at her will solve nothing. Take a deep breath."

He did, and when he exhaled, all of the torches on the ground lit.

Garet glanced at them, feeling his anger turn into confusion. "I didn't do that."

We did.

The voice spoke directly into his head, echoing eerily, though he could not place what felt weird about it. "Who's there?" he called out, scanning the room.

Atop the stairs, more torches ignited, revealing an armor-clad figure on the upper level. Covered from head to toe in deep green armor, he could see only a small opening on the helm for the person to see. A sword rested in its scabbard on his hip, one armored hand resting on the pommel.

"Who are you?" Hama asked.

The guardian of wind, the voice replied, *sealed here long ago by the Anemoi.*

Felix took a deep breath, then stood up straight again. "Why?"

They feared my power.

"What quarrel did you have with the Anemoi?" he asked.

We watched their cities, worked their fields, and built their empire, and in exchange, they spared us from their cleansing. Then they betrayed and slaughtered us like cattle.

Suddenly Garet recognized why the voice sounded so strange. It was as if an entire crowd of people stood beside him, whispering into his ears simultaneously. The voice was actually a hundred, or a thousand, voices, all speaking at once. He shivered. The voices of those killed by the Anemoi.

"We seek the defeat of the Anemoi," Hama said. "Will you assist us?"

No.

"I see," Hama said. "In that case, do you need our assistance in freeing yourself?"

No.

Hama frowned. "Then we shall leave you and hope you find what you seek."

I cannot allow that.

The door suddenly slammed shut behind Garet, flaring up his anger once more. "Hey, what gives? We've got no problem with you!"

You have an Anemian in your midst.

Garet froze, then turned to Sheba as Hama and Felix did the same. The girl remained pressed up against the wall, where Garet had left her, still trying to vanish inside it. "She is Anemian by blood only," Felix said. "She grew up knowing nothing of her ancestors and now seeks ways to stop them."

We died for our heritage, regardless of circumstances. Vengeance will be delivered.

The ring of steel sounded through the chamber as Garet drew his blade. "You'll be delivering shit," he said. "If you want my friend, then try and prove your worth. I'll send you to whatever afterlife you missed out on the first time."

Your defense of the Anemian is treason against humanity, Garet Williams. Prepare yourself.

Garet had a brief moment to wonder how the spirit knew his name before it raised its hand. Psynergy pulsed from the armored man and Garet felt the torches around him flicker

briefly, then explode. The four torches loosed flames into the air, swirling around him as they converged.

Garet merely laughed.

He took hold of the flames themselves and mentally shoved, scattering the flaming vortex and surprising himself with how easy it felt. The spirit obviously had significant power to create that much fire, but had weak control over it.

Stepping forward, Garet pulled the flames towards him this time, pouring them in front of him. They flowed like water into a pool before him, condensing and turning into a miniature sun. Once it had become as wide as his chest, he loosed the fireball at the spirit, a trail of flames following it. It connected with the spirit's armor, exploding in a great burst and scattering stray flames all about the chamber. Garet casually reached up and extinguished one as it landed on his shoulder, waiting for the smoke to clear.

When it did, the spirit stepped forward, unharmed. "Impossible," Garet breathed.

Hama stepped beside him, hurling a single bolt of lightning at the spirit, who made no effort to avoid or deflect it. As it slowly descended the stairs, the bolt struck it directly in the chest, fizzling out completely. "As I thought," Hama muttered. "Myrtle."

Garet turned back to the spirit, realization and horror dawning simultaneously as he eyed the deep green armor. *Jupiter, though not Anemian,* the spirit said. *Are you of the beasts?*

"I am Quetzalcoatl," Hama said loudly. "Descended from he who spurned the Anemoi."

And yet now you admit their presence. We know not your significance, feathered snake, but your fate is joined with theirs. The spirit raised its hand as it reached the bottom of the stairs and the air around it began to cool. Garet looked on in confusion as water materialized and froze into elongated icicles. Before he could question it, however, the spirit launched them at Hama.

He pulled flames forward to scatter the ice, but before they even sparked, Hama's lightning had already snapped out, shattering them to pieces. By the time the Psynergy reached her, it had been reduced to nothing more than fine sleet.

"I can't read him," the woman said calmly. "He has no Chi flow, and he can use multiple elements."

"Makes sense, I guess," Garet said. "He's dead. I doubt there's even a body in that armor, just a collection of spirits. And since those spirits are from everyone the Anemoi have killed, they can use all kinds of Psynergy." He flexed his hand, raising his sword. "It's weak, though. We can overpower it and take him apart physically."

Garet charged forward as the spirit raised a hand, releasing a stream of lightning, but he felt Hama shift her Psynergy and draw it past him into her own hand, discharging it to the ground. Inside the spirit's defense, Garet grinned as he swung his blade, ready to take the armor apart piece by piece if necessary.

He found himself quite surprised when the spirit's own blade somehow wound up against his, though, the metallic clash still ringing in the still air. The man quickly turned, sliding the blade to the side and attacking from the other side, but the spirit blocked the attack again, moving unnaturally fast.

Garet cursed.

The armored man attacked this time, its blade flashing in the firelight. Garet stepped back, barely keeping up with the speed of the spirit's attacks. He ducked under one swing, feeling the sword graze his hair, and thanked the gods for not being a few inches taller. His foot snapped out, catching the armored leg behind the ankle and sweeping it, knocking the spirit to the ground with a clanging not very different from a dropped pot.

The Mars Adept backed away, moving beside Hama once more. "He's so fast," he muttered. "I can't keep up."

Earth and rock shifted beneath their armored foe, pushing the spirit back to its feet, then rippling towards them. Garet braced his legs, ready to be flung into the air, but a wave of Venus Psynergy rushed through them from behind, halting the spirit's spell.

"Find a way...to stop it...without Psynergy," Felix said from behind them, gasping for air. Garet knew the man was close to unconsciousness, and would be an easy target at that point. They would get no help from him. Nor could Sheba help them, given that the girl's battle experience was limited to Psynergy only.

Instead of attacking them with Psynergy again, however, the spirit leapt forward, forcing Garet back into swordplay. Evidently it had realized the considerable advantage it held in the area and intended to use it. Garet moved as quickly as he could, realizing that only a single mistake would spell his death, and that mistake approached with every block, every parry, every dodge. He prided himself on his swordplay, but no defense could last forever.

As he reached the wall, he began to move along it, wondering it he could somehow use it to his advantage.

While he thought, however, his foot landed in a puddle of dark blood, courtesy of the dragon still pinned to the stone above him. His footing slipped, dropping him to a knee and dipping his blade. Seeing its opportunity, the spirit lunged.

Before the blade could connect, though, Hama appeared behind the armor, shoving her bare fist into its back. To Garet's surprise, the armored man flew through the air, rattling against the floor. Hama helped Garet return to his feet and smiled at his shocked expression. "He might not have a Chi flow, but I still do."

"Wait, so your Chi still works on him?" he asked.

"Evidently Myrtle has no effect on it," she said in that same, infuriatingly calm tone of voice Alex often used.

Your eastern arts will not deliver you, the spirit said as the rock shifted to lift it to its feet, holding up its empty hand.

Again the flames flickered and Garet sensed Mars energy being gathered. "Oh, like that's going to work," he snorted. As he watched, though, the energy began to gather around the gauntlet, pooling in the form of red light, and Garet's eyes went wide. "Dammit, let's...shit!" He dropped his sword and grabbed Hama with one hand, holding his other out behind him. Flames gathered and exploded in a short-range burst, propelling the two forward as the spirit released a beam of Mars energy. The beam screamed forth with a high-pitched shriek, burning into the opposite wall instead of them.

Garet and Hama rolled across the chamber floor, finally bouncing to a painful stop against the side of one of the torches. Garet stood back up, helping Hama up, who brushed herself off and gave him an amused look. "A very eloquent plan, Garet."

He shrugged, turning back towards the spirit. "Whatever works." His eyes followed the beam of pure Mars energy as it died out, leaving a glowing ring of molten rock on the far wall that began to drip down, as if the spirit had wounded Weyard itself.

Wait.

Oh.

Oh.

"Got a plan, Hama," he said.

"Will it work as well as that last one?"

"I certainly hope so. Distract it for me, will you?" Without waiting for an answer, Garet moved towards the center of the torches, feeling each of them waver and dance. Closing his eyes and reaching out, he pulled everything he could from them, leaving just enough to allow them to continue burning, and thus continue creating more energy for him to gather.

In the end, though, he realized there simply was not enough Mars energy for him to gather. Venus reigned too strongly down here, far from the constant source that Sol provided. He would need to draw the majority from himself, and in doing so, would be lucky if he remained conscious long enough to see his plan work.

Energy began to flow from his very being, the source of power that all Adepts learned to harness Alchemy through, and into his hands.

He drew upon his standard pool, that which he used for instant Psynergy where he had no time to gather energy

from his surroundings, and felt nothing but growing power.

He drew upon his reserves pool, that which he maintained ready for sustained fights to either transfer for more immediate use or build for a planned attack, and felt his breathing become labored as his hands grew bright.

He drew upon his emergency pool, that which he had used only once, on Venus Lighthouse, draining his Psynergy to levels that Kraden had cautioned him about the hazards of, and felt his body become numb in a fashion that he imagined Saturos and Menardi had felt immediately prior to their fusion.

He continued to draw from his being, not knowing how far he could possibly go, or even what effects it might have on him. He didn't care. If this failed, they were all dead anyway, so he might as well draw on everything he had in him.

When his vision went gray, he decided he had gathered enough.

Garet forced his pent-up energy through his hands, forcing it to remain in a pure and concentrated form, the form Jenna had discovered and shared. A brilliant white beam cut into his vision as it burst from his palms, shearing through his dimmed vision and accompanied by the roar of one continuous explosion. Dragons aspired to sound like this, Garet thought numbly, keeping his beam focused on the cavern floor. Dragons could roar, he supposed, but an Adept could...could...

What was the word Ivan used?

Oh, right.

Resound.

As his collection of energy emptied, the beam died out, but Garet still found himself standing, his eyes shut against the intense light. He stepped backward, opening his eyes slowly to check on his plan.

A pool of molten rock lay before him, the air above it shimmering with heat. Most importantly, the pool had been created by the effects of Psynergy, not through Psynergy itself. For all intents and purposes, the magma was entirely natural.

He backed away slowly, still surprised he could move. He should have passed out during the discharge. Shaking his head to discard the thoughts, he looked up to where Hama still fought the spirit. "Hama! Here!"

The woman made no acknowledgment to him, and when he looked up, he remembered she could not read the spirit's Chi flow. He did not understand her meaning entirely, but he knew she counted on an enemy's Chi flow to read their movements. Even if she could strike the spirit, she was at the same disadvantage he was.

He had to help her. The realization came with a bitter laugh; how could he possibly help her in this condition? As he lamented the irony, however, he realized he could still concentrate. He could still feel a reserve of Psynergy inside him, keeping him conscious. How the hell had he missed that?

"Felix," he groaned, stumbling forward, and simply pointed towards the pinned dragon. The Valean evidently understood, because the sword suddenly came loose, falling to the ground alongside the massive blue dragon. Garet picked it up as he walked, grabbing his own sword as well a few feet away, then strode towards the spirit.

It saw him approach and turned to position both him and Hama on one side, which Garet expected – it also pushed him closer to the center of the chamber. He swung both swords at the spirit, one at a time, continuing to aim for the weak points and force the spirit to avoid the attacks. It chose to deflect some with its armor, but Garet quickly turned that against the spirit as well and used the opportunities to force it back further.

I see. So such power has corrupted you to walk the same path as they, the spirit said, refusing to glance back at the molten pool.

"If it has," Garet said, holding up both swords, "then I'll walk it all the way to hell. Hama!"

From behind him the Jupiter Adept leapt as Garet swung upwards, pulling the spirit's blade up and free of Hama's path. The woman snapped her foot out in midair, planting it firmly on the dark green breastplate and pushing off. The spirit flew into the air, arced slowly, then fell directly into the center of the magma.

Garet immediately dropped both swords and raised his hands, pulling the molten rock over the spirit as if wrapping it in dough. It made no noise as the magma buried it, though Garet watched the armor warp and collapse together as it became malleable.

The man simply sat down where he was, then fell backwards onto his hands, exhausted. He heard Felix shuffle over and collapse beside him, followed by a small pattering of feet as Sheba knelt next to him. "Garet...I'm so sorry, Garet, this is my fault..."

"Shut up," he said weakly, grinning.

Despite herself, Sheba smiled as well, wiping the corners of her eyes. "Isn't that a point for me?"

"I say we call it even."

Chapter 10: A Glimpse Inside the Vault

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 10 – A Glimpse Inside the Vault

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"Heir to the Serpent Throne."

Ivan's eyes opened to the unfamiliar stone roof of his sister's house, moonlight filtering in through the window. The voice had been scarce more than a whisper, the words of the wind as it pushed at the curtains. With it came the smell of freshly picked corn, the husk peeled away to reveal the golden kernels beneath.

He knew the voice called to him, though. After a moment he sat up on his bed, pausing in the darkness as he waited to see if it would speak again. When it did not, he rose to his feet, silently moving to the door in his bedclothes. His bare feet padded down the hallway to the front door, carrying him through it without a sound.

The city lay as silent as his movements, save for the breeze that always rolled down the mountains from the lighthouse. The boy glanced around him as he walked in the direction that felt right, but saw no one else. Every window he passed was dark, the only light coming from the moon and stars.

When he reached the center of the city, he found a green-haired man waiting for him. His heart jumped and the world around him blurred suddenly, but the man made a gentle hushing sound, his eyes on Ivan. The surroundings came

back into focus as the boy calmed down, realizing the man was not Clotho. The brilliant green hair only fell to his neck, for one, and his face held the lines of age.

Ivan stopped across the main square from him, watching the man with a surprising lack of fear or worry. He could not help but admire the deep blue armor the man wore, encasing him in the color of the twilit sky. "Why me?" he asked simply.

"I request your help," the man said, his voice ringing out into the night air, entering Ivan's head like a gentle melody. Only when the man spoke again did Ivan realize his mouth never moved. "Find me here. Free me here. Let me right my wrongs."

"Free you from what?" Ivan asked.

The armored man locked his eyes with the boy's, the full moon behind him framing his head. Instead of an answer, an unnatural chill seized Ivan, making him shiver uncontrollably. The moon and stars dimmed, flickered, then extinguished entirely, plunging the city into an icy darkness.

And then, as the denizens of darkness are wont to do, something stirred.

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Though the worst of winter had already passed northern Angara, snow still drifted across it in mild flurries, painting the land white. After a week or two, the sun would return and return the world to its normal splendor, but when the quintet arrived outside Vault, they were greeted by a blinding blanket of glittering crystal.

Jenna groaned loudly, complaining about their terrible timing. She stomped her foot in the snow a few times and hurled some flames, venting her anger directly at the source, though rather ineffectively. Ivan smiled, laughing at Jenna's antics, but his expression revealed his disappointment with the weather. Aaron cheered, rejoicing at the sight of snow in an echo of every other young child in Vault.

Mia simply felt relieved. Such small amounts of snow could be found in Imil until late spring most years, giving the residents only four months of respite before returning in early autumn. Many Imilians found snow to be dreary and boring, a sentiment she could understand when one lived in snow for so long. She, however, still appreciated the beauty fire and ice created together, despite the dangers that sunset brought to the north.

Here, though... Such scant snow, and the air barely cold enough to keep water frozen... It was nice. All the awe snow inspired, yet with none of the worst threats. "I like this climate," she said. "I might need to move here someday."

"Oh? Planning your future out already?" Alex asked, glancing sideways at her.

She shook her head. "Weren't you the one who taught me the benefits of having plans?"

"And second plans," he said. "And third, and sometimes fourth and fifth, too. You can never be too careful, really."

Mia looked away, his words bringing up thoughts that were doing well enough just under the surface of her mind. An awkward silence fell between them as they continued to walk through the shallow snow, punctuated only by the random shouts of excitement from Aaron ahead of them.

Jenna's responses came slightly more quietly, while Ivan's could barely be heard at all.

"I suppose that was rather tactless, coming from me," Alex muttered. "I apologize."

She glanced over at him sharply, finding him looking straight ahead, his typical blank expression on his face. "Are you reading my mind?"

The man sighed, shaking his head. "Why does everyone seem to think that? I read people. I don't need to read minds. I understand what a distasteful act it is."

"I'm sorry," Mia said softly, looking away again.

"Don't be," Alex said, shaking his head again. "I..." He paused and frowned. "Never mind. You're planning on leaving Imil, though?"

Mia hesitated, stopping herself from immediately sidestepping the question. She disliked lying directly, but found half-truths and distractions perfectly acceptable alternatives. "Not yet," she said. "It's become easier with the fountain, but it only helps with disease. I'm trying to train more people up, perhaps to try and rebuild the Mercury Clan."

"How are the children coming along with it?" Alex asked.

"Very well," Mia said with a nod. "Megan is weak on her diagnoses, but she has incredible bedside manner. I've seen her reduce patients from hysteria to normal conversation in mere minutes." The woman frowned. "Though she can't seem to give me an accurate list of the properties of elderberries. She'll learn it, and then a week later she'll

forget one, or give me one that's not right. It's getting a bit frustrating, actually."

Alex chuckled quietly. "I cannot fault her there. I could never recite medicinal properties very well. What about Justin?"

Mia lightly scoffed. "Even more infuriating than her. No matter how much I tell him otherwise, his first response to most things is to use Psynergy, just to see if it helps." She smiled slightly, altering the pitch of her voice. "'It can't hurt to try, and it could save time.' Justin, she's sick because she's pregnant. '...Oh.'"

The smile remained steady on Alex's face. "All of us go through a phase of that, sooner or later. I'm sure it will pass."

"If it doesn't, I'm going to-"

"Guys, come on, I can see the gate!"

Mia looked up again to see Aaron suddenly take off running, Jenna and Ivan immediately taking off to follow him, shouting at him to slow down. The woman groaned, not feeling particularly up to running the remainder of the distance.

"Allow me, please," Alex said, holding out his hand. Mia glanced at it hesitantly for a second, then took hold. Instantly she felt the world around her waver, her eyes practically spinning in their sockets. In the next moment, everything suddenly collapsed into her, then expanded back out.

She glanced around in confusion, wondering what happened, when she realized that the others were now running *towards* her. "What...I don't..."

"You were once asked whether or not you could warp," Alex said, and realization dawned on Mia about what had happened. "You said then it was impossible for you. Tell me, Mia, do you still think that?"

She remembered the setting perfectly: the aerie of Mercury Lighthouse, the only time she had seen Alex between his initial vanishing and his return four days ago. The conversation, however, was just a vague memory, like remnants of a dream triggered by a stray thought hours after waking.

The meeting had been before the dawning of the Golden Sun, though, before Alex gained his other elements. At the time, he had merely been a Mercury Adept. And had she not seen King Hydros do the exact same thing while fighting Clotho? "No," she said slowly. "You must have found a way while you were gone, something that we never thought of."

"Yes and no," he said, holding up a shimmering white stone. "This is the Warp Pearl. While I initially used it to warp, I eventually learned that I really had no use for it, since the warp is among a Mercury Adept's many birthrights." He reached over and gently grabbed Mia's hand, pressing the stone into it. "Please, use it for now, until you feel comfortable without it."

His hand departed, leaving behind the pearl. She held it up to her eyes, watching the light dance across the milky edge. The whisper that all alchemy tools gave off touched her mind, asking for her Psynergy. She looked up at Alex questioningly and received a nod in return, so she grabbed his hand and answered the tool's call.

The world around her shimmered like the edge of the pearl, before stretching in towards her again, every source of light

extending an impossibly long distance, or so it seemed. In the next moment, everything settled, and she found herself and Alex still some distance away from Vault's gate. She turned around and found the others even further away, then looked back at Alex in confusion. "Why didn't it work all the way?" she asked.

"It has a limited range," he said, shrugging. "I'm not sure why, or the specifics of how it works, since it seems different from Jupiter's teleportation, which has no range. However, also unlike teleportation, there are no consequences for using it, save the standard use of Psynergy. Warp away, if you so desire."

Mia glanced at the jewel again, then towards the gate. "So if I wanted to, I could essentially 'hop' to where I want to go?"

Alex nodded. "You can travel across a continent in a matter of hours. Oceans remain impassible, however."

"I understand," Mia said, then frowned thoughtfully. "Though, couldn't you simply create some ice, warp to that, and repeat across the water? Like a series of stepping stones."

"Hmm... An interesting idea," Alex said, tapping his chin. "In theory it would be possible, but you run a great risk of exhausting yourself before you get there due to the double use of Psynergy. Running out on land is a hindrance, but running out in the middle of the ocean..." He spread his arms and Mia nodded, understanding his implication.

"Besides," he continued, "teleportation is far more useful for travel, at least for everything but short distances. Such continued casting will leave you exhausted if you are going a significant distance."

"And recovery from excessive Psynergy use will take a full night's sleep at best," Mia said, nodding. "Whereas the teleportation sickness only requires about four hours." She wrinkled her nose. "Though that short time is still irritating."

A smirk came over Alex's face. "Come now, you mean to say you *don't* enjoy the constant feeling of being mere moments away from vomiting?"

Sighing, Mia said, "Alex...every time I think you're different from before, you go and remind me that you're still that same, sarcastic boy I grew up with." Now she turned to him. "Or is it all an act? A trick to get my defenses down?"

Alex frowned and looked away. "If you want the truth...then yes, in some ways, it is an act. I've been deliberately trying to make you remember those years, but not to try and trick you. I..." He trailed off, crossing his arms. "I know you don't really believe me, and you're probably sick of hearing that I never wanted to hurt you, so I won't bother. I believed...perhaps if I reminded you of how things used to be, if I tried to return to those ways, we might be able to repair our relationship."

Mia said nothing, musing over her response as they walked along some distance ahead of the others. Ivan and Jenna had each glanced back frequently before, and she knew they likely found the warping suspicious, but neither made any attempt to interrupt them or linger protectively around her. She was glad of that, honestly; while she knew both were concerned for her safety, she had begun to find them slightly stifling. She imagined nobles who had constant bodyguards felt much the same way.

"A relationship is not something that can be fixed, like a broken chair," she said at last, though gently. "It's more like

a plant, alive and ever-growing. Trust is the soil the relationship grows from, and you uprooted ours and let it die. That relationship, like a plant, can never be returned to life."

Alex made a light scoff, sounding identical to the crunches their boots made in the snow. "If only I believed that... What would you suggest, then? How can we handle this?"

Mia shrugged. "In the same manner you deal with anything that has died: we start over. I can never forget what you did to us, and I'll likely never forgive you, either. That doesn't mean we can't move past it, though."

"I see..." The man held out his hand to her. "In that case, my name is Alex. Pleased to meet you, miss."

She raised an eyebrow, staring at him for a moment, then shook her head, smiling. "I am glad to see you didn't lose your sense of humor, though. My father would be furious."

Alex smiled and shook his head as well. "I won't deny that he helped shape me. I am certainly far more solemn these days, though that may simply have been caused by a lack of good company."

"Did you not like the Proxians?" she asked.

The man frowned, seemingly more to himself. "It wasn't that I disliked them, per say... They were good people, if a bit brutish at times, ones who circumstances forced into a hard situation. I don't fault them for not being perfect. We just...never had much to talk about together, other than the mission."

A long pause entered the conversation, before Mia finally said something that surprised her. "You could have brought

me, you know."

Alex held his gaze steadily forward. "...I didn't think you would have joined us. You were devoted to the Clan so heavily. You never held that constant questioning attitude I did, the seed that drives all rebellions."

"Maybe not," Mia said quietly, "but I did trust *you*. If you had come to me, told me what was happening... I would have protested, I would have called you a liar, I would have screamed, but in the end, I would have believed you. You were always smarter than me, more observant about the world. While I could see the 'what', you saw the 'why' and 'how'."

Alex sighed. "I suppose our options our always clearer in hindsight. Nevertheless, it wouldn't do to dwell on missed opportunities. I made my choice, and my mistake, and the consequences are mine to bear. Instead, I will need to ensure I never make the same mistake again."

Mia nodded. "Good. I'm happy to hear that. And with that said..." She stopped and turned to him, forcing him to do the same. "Why exactly is the Golden Sun so important to you?"

In a rare display, Mia briefly saw Alex's eyes widen the slightest amount, accompanied by the faint whisper of the smallest intake of breath. She would not have noticed either one had she not been specifically looking for a reaction, and even then, they were almost hidden by the glare of the fading sunlight on the snow and the gentle breeze that drifted lazily past them.

A moment later his face was a mask once more, the response quickly stifled by the man's strong self-discipline. When he opened his mouth to speak, however, Mia cut him off. "Alex Ambrosen, you had better not be preparing to lie to me," she

said firmly. "I may not read people as well as you, but I still know it means something to you, something you don't want to tell me."

The man glanced away. "It's not that. It's just...a sensitive matter to me."

"Alex, I've known you all of my life," Mia said gently, placing a hand on his arm. "There are few things sensitive to you that are not also sensitive to me."

He looked back at her, then dropped his eyes to the ground again. "I want... The Golden Sun is power, Mia. The ultimate power. Unlimited power. And as I told you earlier, I never want to make the same mistakes twice."

Mia looked at him for a moment, confused, and then his words suddenly clicked into place in her mind. "Oh gods. This is about Marie, isn't it?"

Alex said nothing in response, simply continuing to stare at the snow beneath his boots, occasionally allowing his eyes to drift to the sides. Mia stood in front of him in silence, the full storm of emotion around Marie's death crashing into her once more, for the first time in years.

"Mia, is something wrong?"

She turned away from Alex, finding herself fighting tears from the corners of her eyes. Ivan was walking towards them, Jenna and Aaron a short distance behind him. Evidently he had become concerned about their sudden stop. "No," she said, shaking her head. "We're fine. Just talking about a few things that needed talked about."

Ivan nodded, still frowning, but before he could speak, Alex said, "As much as I enjoy standing around in the snow, night

is continuing to fall, and I suggest we find ourselves inside the city walls before that happens."

"Can't you just warp us the rest of the way?" Ivan asked.

Alex shook his head. "It only allows for a single passenger. It's not complex enough to deal with more."

"Then we should get walking," Mia said, tilting her head in the direction of Vault. "It should only be another twenty minutes or so."

As they resumed walking, Mia tried to slip thoughts of Marie back under a layer of consciousness, allowing the thoughts to be present without having to bear the full brunt of emotions. It made her feel cold and cruel, thinking about the girl that way. She idly wondered if that was how Alex always felt.

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"Mom, I can't eat any more!"

Jenna pushed herself back from the table, firmly shaking her head. Her mother pushed a plate of roast beef towards her, firmly staring at the girl.

Throwing back her head, Jenna groaned and said, "I'm serious, if I eat anything else, I'll explode!" She emphasized her point by thrusting her stomach out as far as possible and thumping it with one hand. "It's delicious, mom, it really is, but I feel so fat right now. Give some more to Ivan, he needs to put on some weight."

"What?" Ivan asked flatly, staring across the table at her, but his steady glare crumbled as Laura turned her attention on

him, piling roast beef, red peppers, and browned onions onto his plate.

Jenna grinned at the dismay on his face, knowing the boy would never waste food he had been given. "Sorry Ivan, better you than me." She stood up and stretched, feeling her stomach groan with the effort. Any threat she made involving explosions was only ever half a joke, at most.

She glanced down the length of the table, marveling at how many people they had managed to fit at it. She had made a point of sitting Ivan across from her, knowing that he would otherwise have retreated to one end of the table and spent the night in silence. Now, at least, he had spoken and gotten somewhat comfortable with her parents.

To her left sat Kay, who had quickly discovered a great joy in tormenting Ivan, much to the boy's embarrassment. Jenna had tried to get him to relax by telling him to think of Kay as Garet, but with breasts. Unfortunately, the comment only served to make Ivan slink deeper into his chair.

Aaron sat next to his sister, while their parents and grandparents endlessly fussed over him. As Kraden had predicted, his return, as well as Jenna's, and the news of the others' safety, had been met with much relief and celebrating. For his part, all of the frightening things the boy had experienced seemed to have completed their transition to exciting, in hindsight. His tale of the post-Colosso trek across Tolbi was filled with awe and adventure.

Alex and Mia sat at the end of the table beyond the Williams, politely joining in the conversation once a suitable amount of coddling had passed. Alex had surprised Jenna with how amiable he seemed to everyone, causing an uproar with a pair of stories he told earlier in the night. Jenna had

watched Ivan frown, feeling the same, but said nothing about it.

Down on her right extended her entire family, save her brother, of course. Her parents, grandparents, and aunt had spent all dinner fighting for attention and details about what had happened. Questions about Felix were raised quietly, and with frequent glances towards the other end of the table, but the elder Williams' focus rested entirely on his grandson.

Dora and Kyle had come as well, glad to hear both of Isaac's success at getting into Colosso, as well as his well-being through the events that followed. They remained quiet through most of the dinner, showing interest in the discussions, but adding little themselves. Jenna figured they were probably just a bit disappointed their son had not been able to come back yet, either.

The families had played a fantastic collective audience when Jenna told of what had happened so far. Her father voiced his disbelief when she spoke of Clotho, smiling gently at her exaggerations, but his smile faded when the other three all explained with straight faces that, no, nothing Jenna had said was an exaggeration. In fact, if anything, she hadn't done him justice. Jenna frowned at Alex for the last comment, but the man simply shrugged apologetically.

"Ugh," she said, pushing her chair back in. "I need to get some air. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Her mother gestured up at her with the serving fork. "Don't be out there too long. I don't want you getting sick."

Jenna rolled her eyes as she turned around, saying, "Yes, mother." She stepped outside quickly, closing the door as the cool air curled its fingers into the opening, trying to pull

itself inside. It settled instead for wrapping around the young woman, snaking down her limbs towards her body, the true prize. As it flicked out its misty tongue towards her, however, it met a swift death as Jenna flared her Psynergy, wrapping herself in a shimmering cloak of warmth.

She frowned, crossing her arms as she walked away from the house, leaving the sounds of casual conversation and clatter of plates and mugs behind, finding the streets of Vault pleasantly silent. The chill in the air and time of night kept them mostly empty, as well; only twice did she pass someone on the streets, exchanging nothing more than a polite greeting in the darkness.

Their own dinner had run late, she realized as she walked. Glancing through the windows of other houses, she found few still eating. Many had already doused their candles for the night, their houses as silent as the streets. Jenna found herself envying them slightly.

Not for their families. She loved her family, and would never think of wanting another. More, perhaps, but not at the cost of her current relatives. She did not envy their warm houses, either, though she felt that she could be justified in doing so. Despite having fought to the ends of Weyard to save the world, she had been rewarded with the destruction of both houses she called home, forcing them to adopt their cramped quarters in Vault. Their living arrangements could be better, she supposed, but it was nothing to envy another over. Nor did she envy their full bellies, though that was for far less selfless reasons, she thought wryly, rubbing her own stomach.

No, she realized, her envy stemmed from their carelessness. The most they had to concern themselves with was their own well-being, taking care of themselves and those they

cared for. When night fell, they could crawl into their beds, satisfied with their work for the day and sleep comfortably, knowing that dawn would bring another day of similar events.

It was not something she blamed them for. Felix had often explained to her when they were younger that those gifted with power had a responsibility to use it for those who were not. She had disagreed then, thinking that so long as their power wasn't used in unsavory ways, it should be their choice whether or not to use it.

An idealistic viewpoint, she had come to realize, one that could only work in an ideal world. She never thought their journey had changed her significantly, that she had more or less remained the same person she had always been, but every so often she would come across these minor epiphanies, these small glimpses into her own mind and realize that it had changed her in the same way a blacksmith tempered steel – the overall shape had been left unchanged, but small, minute changes had been introduced, hopefully to make the piece better.

And now she had compared herself to a sword. Jenna shook her head. Garet would never let her hear the end of that one, if he knew. But she found the comparison apt. Her power lay in combat, so to the people of Weyard, she really was a sword. Hers was the point that could pierce the heavens...or at least the Anemoi.

She looked away from the stars above, finding herself on the bridge at the southern edge of town. She glanced around briefly in confusion, not remembering having walked there, then realized she had no idea where she *had* walked.

Sighing, Jenna leaned on the wooden railing, feeling a slight breeze toss her ponytail around.

"Still feeling poorly?"

She spun around instantly, drawing her cloak of heat into her hand in preparation to attack, but when she found Alex standing opposite her on the bridge, she slowly let it return. "Alex, what the hell are you doing? Where did you come from?"

The man spread his arms and bowed his head apologetically. "I'm sorry, I didn't want others to see me and get the wrong idea, so I concealed myself."

Jenna scoffed. "So I get the wrong idea instead. Are you following me?"

Alex nodded, then shrugged. "You weren't looking well when you left, so I decided to follow you and make sure everything was alright."

"Oh, I see." Jenna leaned back against the railing, putting her elbows up on the wood. "You're lying through your teeth."

To her surprise, he smiled, mimicking her position. "Only partially. While I did want to make sure you were alright, I had mostly just become tired of putting on such a charade for your family."

Jenna's eyes narrowed slightly and she felt her jaw tighten. "Charade? If you're trying to pull something over on them, I swear to the gods, you'll be rewriting the definition of pain."

"It's nothing you need to worry about," he said, shaking his head. "I just wanted to put them at ease, so they don't worry

about you more. Putting on a friendly air also stops them from growing suspicious of me, since I hardly need any more of that."

Jenna frowned, but relaxed. If it came to it, her own family would believe her about the man, regardless of his impression, and the Williams would react rather harshly to the truth of his involvement in the restoration of Alchemy. She was actually a bit surprised that none of those present had seen him just prior to the Golden Sun's dawn; several Valeans had reported seeing him approach Mt. Aleph, but apparently, their families had been elsewhere.

"Is everything you do like that?" she asked suddenly after a minute of silence. When Alex simply gave her a confused look, she elaborated. "Half righteous, half self-serving. Everything you do seems to be for the general good, but you always gain something out of it, too."

He shrugged again. "Is there something wrong with everyone walking away ahead? It doesn't always have to be a choice between myself and others."

"You say that, but I can't help but wonder if half of the explanations are just covers," she said.

Raising an eyebrow, Alex asked, "Oh? Then which half is the cover, I wonder? Am I a greedy man, hiding behind a mask of generosity, or a benevolent saint cowering under a shroud of indifference?"

Jenna snorted, then smiled. "It's a tough choice, but I'm going with the greedy one."

Alex did not smile. "I was being facetious," he said, his casual mocking tone absent, replaced with a firmness Jenna thought odd in the man. "The world is not so easily divided

into two categories, Jenna. Few things are so clear cut to the extremes. Forget that at your own peril."

She frowned, looking up at the stars. "Why would I think you cared if my family was worried?" she said after a long moment. "I mean, sure, you've proven you can be trusted, to an extent, but you've never shown that you care about anyone by yourself." She paused for a moment. "And maybe, *maybe* Mia."

"Nothing that I say will convince you otherwise," Alex said, his normal tone returned. "I see no reason to waste breath trying. You'll still think me up to something."

Shrugging, Jenna said, "My curiosity has been aroused. And I've always been one for a good story."

Alex stared at her for a long moment, his face as still as the stars, and Jenna began to wonder if she should have kept the remark to herself. What would happen if she actually made Alex mad? Would he attack her? What could she even do if he did?

He surprised her by laughing suddenly. "I've always admired your bite. You know no fear, and it gives you power."

She shook her head, looking away again. "I know fear, and it terrifies me," she said quietly.

They lapsed into silence for another long moment. A dog barked twice somewhere in the town, followed by the sound of a door opening and closing, and then the silence resumed. As Jenna was about to excuse herself, though, Alex spoke. "Family matters are important to me, even if they aren't my own."

Jenna turned back to him and found him facing out towards the town, his back to her. "I would not wish distress over family members on anyone, least of all for those I consider allies."

"Where is your family?" Jenna asked slowly after a pause, suspicions forming in her mind.

"All dead," Alex replied in his calm voice. "Not at once, but each one, individually. First my mother, then my father, and finally my sister."

"Oh gods," Jenna whispered, covering her mouth with her hand. "Alex... I'm so sorry... I didn't know..."

"Of course you didn't," the man said easily. "I've never told you. Mia could have, I suppose, but I doubt the subject ever came up. Why would the family of the great betrayer matter?" he asked wryly. Jenna could almost see the sarcastic smirk on his face, even with his back turned.

She opened her mouth to apologize, then closed it again, realizing she had no idea what to say. Now, mixed in amongst the distrust and suspicion swam sympathy and remorse. She found herself wanting to walk over to the man and give him a hug, the only answer she could think of giving.

A sudden thought froze Jenna cold. "Alex...if you're lying to me right now..." she said slowly, not bothering to hide the emotion in her voice.

He looked back at her, surprise on his face, replaced with a gentle smile after a moment. "No, I'm not lying. I have nothing to prove my words, of course, but lying about something like this would be foolish. A quick word with Mia would uncover it effortlessly. She knows it all."

Jenna stepped forward to the other side of the bridge, settling on the railing beside Alex and looking over Vault. "Why did you tell me this, Alex?"

"I don't intend for it to be a secret," he said with a shrug. "And it's the answer to your question, after all. Family means a great deal to me, as it does to you. Now you know why."

"How do you know that?" she asked, more curious than sharp.

He smiled again. "I've spent many months with you and your brother, Jenna. I've seen the way you act around him, as well as how you act when he does things that place him in danger. I saw the way you greeted your family this evening, the uncharacteristic tenderness in your eyes during dinner, if not your voice." His mouth curved into a frown. "Or have I misread you?"

The young woman shook her head. "No, you're right. They're the most important thing in the world to me." She seized up suddenly, glancing at the man out of the corner of her eye. Why in the gods' names had she said that? She might as well have told him exactly how to completely destroy her, if he wished.

He made no indication of any such plans, of course, nor any sign that her words had any effect past that of casual conversation. But then again, she supposed he wouldn't. The man held himself on such a tight leash that simply thinking about it often made it difficult for Jenna to breathe.

"I'm heading back," she said after a moment, stepping away from the railing. "Are you coming?"

He shook his head. "I'm finding the cool air rather refreshing. I'll be out here for a short while, I imagine."

Jenna nodded, feeling the familiar wall of apathy towards the man reforming between them, brick by brick. When she turned to leave, however, she could not help but feel that a few bricks were missing.

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"So. Let me see if I am understanding you correctly."

Alex crossed his arms across the table from Ivan, the room lit by candles. The sun had just rose, but it would take another two hours before it dawned atop Vault's walls, leaving the town in a pit of shadow. Mia sat at one side of the table, frowning as she looked between the two. Jenna had not woken; Ivan did not want to risk her wrath by forcing that issue.

Ivan had woken early, as he typically did, the memories of the dream fresh in his head. He had been surprised to find Alex and Mia up already, but decided to speak with them immediately, in case the details began to fade. The only other person to rise so far had been Aaron, who greeted them briefly before running out the door. Mia had stared after him in confusion until Ivan told her that he was following Garet's guidance in training himself.

"He's too young for that," Mia had said, shaking her head. "He shouldn't be worrying about such things yet."

"Better to learn too early, than too late," Alex said quietly, and neither Mia nor Ivan could disagree.

Now the man stood up, pushing the chair back beneath the table, and began to pace, a deep frown on his face. "You believe we should go to Contigo, a mere stone's throw away from Anemos itself, find this man, who *is* Anemian, by the way, free him from whatever is inhibiting or imprisoning

him, and let him 'right his wrongs.' Do I even need to point out that the Anemoi see everyone but themselves as a wrong?"

"We don't know he's Anemian," Ivan said quietly.

Alex threw up his hands. "Yes, because green hair occurs in so many other parts of the world. Tell me, how many green-haired people have you met?"

"Lemurians have green hair," Mia said, looking over at him with a frown.

"Lemurians have blue-green hair, significantly different from the Anemian solid green." Alex glanced over at Ivan again. "Which was it? The green of Lemuria or of Anemos?"

Ivan's eyes turned away slightly and he paused before he realized he didn't want to actually answer the question. Answering would be letting Alex win. "I'm telling you, I didn't have a bad feeling about him," he said firmly. "He didn't make me afraid or nervous at all."

"Yes, that's terribly difficult to achieve," Alex said, then caught and held Ivan's eyes with his own.

A chilling hand suddenly wrapped around the boy's heart, making his blood run cold and his spine turn to ice. He fought down shivers as a wave of terror rolled over his body, nearly earning a whimper from him.

In the next moment, the fear was gone, replaced by a gentle, soothing warmth that spread from his heart, across his chest, down his arms and legs, and all the way to the tips of his fingers and toes. It rested there for a moment, tingling lightly, making every muscle in his body relax.

His stomach then clenched tightly around a ball of iron that formed inside, wrenching his innards about. His breathing sped up as his chest heaved, tears forming unexpectedly in the corners of his eyes. He sniffed once, fighting to keep his burning eyes from spilling.

Finally his chest tightened up, flames igniting inside and burning away all else. Fury flooded his mind, turning the edges of his vision red as his hands balled into fists uncontrollably. Unlike the other sudden emotional shifts, however, Ivan knew this one to be his own. "What are you doing to me?" he shouted, standing up as well.

Alex's piercing gaze lessened, but he maintained the eye contact. "Demonstrating the subtleties of Jupiter Psynergy that you have either forgotten or simply never learned. My control of it is powerful, but crude, as I'm sure you noticed. I've had few opportunities to practice that particular facet."

"That doesn't give you the right to practice on me!" Ivan said, slamming his hands on the table.

"Ivan, please!" Mia whispered sternly, frowning. "You'll wake the others."

"It was not practice, but a demonstration," Alex said calmly. "Those were my own rather hamhanded attempts at forcing a major emotion on you. They were blunt, nothing even resembling subtle, but I still could rapidly shift how you felt." He leaned over the table, mirroring Ivan. "Now imagine what someone who has been doing it for hundreds of years can do. Imagine how precisely and perfectly they can manipulate your emotions, touching them so softly that you never even notice their hands deep inside your own mind."

Ivan continued to stare at Alex for a few seconds, then turned around. "This wasn't an actual meeting, though. It

was a dream, and it was definitely a vision. My visions don't lie to me."

Alex snorted. "Yes, you've expressed that belief a number of times now. I give up reasoning with you. You'll refuse to trust the man who fights alongside you, but willingly and blindly trust a random enemy who appears to you in a dream. You're being nothing more than an idiotic, petulant child."

Ivan spun back around, his hair lifting into the air ever so slightly. "Don't call me that!"

"Which part? Idiotic, petulant, or a child?" Alex placed his hands on his hips. "Or was it simply the order you take offense to? Would I do better calling you a petulant, childish idiot?"

"Alex!" Mia snapped, glaring at him. "That is enough! Both of you need to sit down and grow up!"

Ivan turned to her and found the normally calm woman's face stern. When she turned to him, he quickly fell back into his chair. "Mia, I-"

Mia made a silencing motion with her hand and Ivan shut his mouth. "The two of you have been getting absolutely unbearable. You've done nothing but snap at each other every chance you get, and it's doing nothing but irritating the rest of us."

"Ivan," she said, turning to him. He cringed back slightly from her expression, feeling like a child being yelled at by his mother. "You need to recognize that our enemies have all of the same powers that you do, as well as some you don't know about, and they can manipulate them far better than you. It is absolutely possible that they have found a way to infiltrate and influence dreams."

She turned to the other end of the table, where Alex sat looking down at the table, not meeting Mia's eyes. "Alex. *Alex,"* she repeated, forcing him to look at her. "Like it or not, you are functioning as part of a group right now. You do *not* have the right to criticize and insult others simply because you disagree with them. We cannot work together if you are driving wedges between yourself and everyone else."

Her eyes swung back to Ivan. "You need to remember the same. If there is a disagreement in how you two believe we should proceed, you do not shout about it like chil- like an old married couple. If you can't come to an agreement reasonably, then we'll all get together and talk about it and come up with a solution together."

"And you," she said, turning once again. "You need to remember that a person's mind is off-limits without permission. Invading someone's mind is a terrible breach of privacy. Even with how much Ivan distrusts you, he has never invaded your mind. Such a thing is unthinkable among allies. Since Jupiter Psynergy is still fairly new to you, consider this your warning."

Ivan frowned on the inside, careful to maintain his face neutral. The privacy of Alex's mind had not been saved by something so slight as taboo. Only the knowledge that Alex could detect his Psynergy and change his thoughts to whatever he felt kept Ivan from attempting it; he knew it would be seen as an act of aggression. Despite Mia's words, he expected the same thought was running through Alex's head. The man knew how people worked, for sure.

"Now," she said, sitting back down at the table, "let's discuss this like reasonable people. Regardless of the cause, Ivan, you've had a dream about a man asking you for help. It's safe to assume the dream is some form of message. I also

believe it safe to assume the man is Anemian. Do you agree, Ivan?"

He swallowed once, then nodded, remaining silent.

Mia nodded in response. "Alright. Now, this fact is important, but not defining. We have met one Anemian, not counting Sheba. However, I also remember a time when we met a pair of Proxians, and then spent the next few months imagining their people as greedy, warlike, brutes. I will not make that same mistake again. Clotho is Anemian, but he is not Anemos. There may well be people there who disagree with his policies."

"You're suggesting that if we go, we may find an ally inside Anemos?" Alex asked calmly.

"I am," Mia said. "He might even be needing help from our enemies. Think about how powerful Clotho was, and how useful it would be to have someone like him on our side."

Alex frowned, tapping his fingers on the table thoughtfully. "I will agree," he said after a long moment, "that it is possible this dream could be about an ally. However, it stands an equal likelihood of being a trap. The question, then, seems to be if the chance of gaining a powerful ally outweighs the chance of those who go to Contigo being captured, hurt, or killed."

He raised an eyebrow at Mia, turning the statement into a question. She merely shrugged. "I don't know. At the very least, though, I think we could look into it. Cautiously, of course."

Alex nodded. "Caution will be imperative. Personally, I would rather keep my cards safe than gamble them all on the chance of gaining one."

"But there's also the man himself to consider," Ivan said softly, carefully keeping his voice low and unthreatening. "If it's not a trap, then he needs help, and that message came specifically to me."

"Not to be contrary, but our goal is to stop the Anemoi genocide on Weyard," Alex said, looking over at him. "We are trying to save thousands of thousands of people. Even assuming this is genuine, do we risk the success of that mission to save one man from within the enemy's borders?"

Ivan frowned, looking down. Alex had sound logic in that argument. It was emotional, impulsive, and risky, with far too much on the line to deal with things carelessly. They held the future of Weyard in their hands; if they fell, so did Weyard as they knew it.

Before he could say anything, though, Mia surprised him. "Those thousands of thousands of people are each one man, one woman, one child," she said. "Their lives are worth no more or less than this man's. Our goal is to save people from the Anemoi. Leaving one in their clutches like this undermines the entire purpose of our fight."

Alex stared at her for a few seconds in silence. Right before he began to speak, Ivan suddenly realized that the man had actually been surprised as well. "Mia, choices have to be made between saving one person and saving several all the time. You know this. It's a fundamental part of our profession."

"And this is not one of those situations," Mia said firmly. "It's not a choice between saving him and saving the world, it's only *possibly* a choice between them. If we do it right, we can save him with no issues. Perhaps we can even strike at the Anemoi when we do, and further both goals."

"But if we fail..."

"'Only a coward shies away for fear of failure,' Alex. If we fail at any point, we lose. One more opportunity isn't really a concern."

Alex looked down at the table, then back up at Mia with a small smile. "Your father's wisdom is still teaching us lessons, I suppose. I'm assuming I'm being out-voted?"

Mia shrugged. "I still need to speak with Jenna about it, but unless she has a strong opposition to it, which I don't expect, then yes. We'll be heading to Contigo."

"Understood," Alex said, standing up. "I suggest waiting for a bit, however. I would like some time to think of the best way to go about our business, as well as search around town for anything we might use. If we must enter the beast's maw, I would prefer a strong stick to brace it open."

Ivan watched him leave in silence, leaning on the table, but could find nothing to say to Mia that didn't sound empty. He realized how difficult the situation must be for her, seeing both of them like that. Their current argument really didn't matter; the words were just another costume they donned for their battle. Between the lines, behind their eyes, everything came back to Ivan's vision of the three of them, in the middle of a city, surrounded by the dead.

Her new friend who swears she'll come to harm from her old friend who swears he won't let it come to pass. Both people she trusted deeply to protect her. How could she possibly take sides in that?

She couldn't. Ivan knew it, just as he knew she was right, even if she hadn't said it: he *was* being a child, throwing a tantrum because someone told him he was wrong. Loosing

his frustration like that did no good, nor did it help make Mia believe him.

He had to watch as someone he didn't like threatened the life of someone he cared for deeply. She had to watch as two people she cared for deeply threatened each other. It would be like watching Isaac and Garet at each other's throats, he realized, only able to divert their wrath from each other by using his own relationship to distract them temporarily.

A pair of arms gently wrapped around him, pulling him back into a warm body behind him. "Mia..."

She shushed him quietly, the puff of warm breath tickling his ear before she leaned her head against his. He could feel her heartbeat faintly tapping on his back and her soft breathing rolling across the back of his neck. The feelings emptied his mind and thoughts of Alex vanished, leaving behind a silent content.

He reached up to softly touch her hand, then turned around on impulse and wrapped his arms around her as well, burying his chin into her shoulder. They held each other for a full minute in silence before pulling apart slowly.

"I'm sorry, Mia," Ivan said quietly, looking down again. "I haven't been thinking about how difficult this is for you."

"Even if you haven't, everything that you've done, you've done thinking of me, and I do appreciate that, Ivan, I really do." She leaned forward and kissed him gently on the forehead. "Never forget that, please."

He expected himself to start blushing furiously, for the situation to take a quick turn for the awkward, but in a rather detached fashion he noticed that nothing of the sort happened. *Ironic*, he thought wryly, remembering what had

happened when Hama had done the same. He hadn't been able to look her in the eye for almost a week. That spoke volumes about how close he was to his sister, he supposed.

"I'm sorry for shouting at you like that," Mia continued. "I just... I care for both of you too much to see you like that." She sighed. "We're all a bit strung out, I guess. I feel like we can't settle in one spot for any period of time. We keep needing to move, and there's no sensible progression to it."

Ivan nodded silently. They had planned on returning to Tolbi on the following day, then wait for Kraden to get word back on finding a ship for them. Now, though, they would need to leave today, rushing along towards danger with barely enough time to consider whether it was even a good idea.

He hoped beyond hope that simple danger was the worst that awaited them.

Chapter 11: Northern Steel

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 11 – Northern Steel

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Once again, Ivan found himself fleeing. He recognized them for the dreams they were now, but even armed with that knowledge, he still felt compelled to run, compelled to fall, compelled to scream in terror.

Snow crunched beneath his feet as he ran through the dark forest, darting side to side around trees as they suddenly loomed out of the darkness. The snow had remained blessedly solid thus far, but he knew his luck would not hold. It was simply too early in the dream; the fall would come soon enough, likely borne of a patch of slush or ice hidden under the snow.

His stalker would eventually catch him, as she always did. The morbid truth only doubled his drive, giving him energy to continue the game for what seemed like hours. He had no weapon, and he had learned long ago that his Psynergy would always abandon him here. A fight was not an option, not while outmatched so completely.

At long last, his feet discovered that unfortunate clump of wet snow, feeling it slide out from underneath him as he crashed to the ground. The dull phantom ache of dream pain filled his body, paralyzing him and preventing him from returning to his feet. Instead he simply waited, hearing the snow crunch in the darkness beyond his vision, the herald of his own personal sleep reaper.

When Garet stepped into sight, however, Ivan suddenly found himself thoroughly confused. The man stood there with his arms crossed, staring at the boy with an enormous grin on his face. Ivan struggled to rise to his feet again, the terrible horror abruptly vanishing. As he stood up, though, Garet spoke.

"I told you that this day would come, Ivan. Do you remember our conversation? Do you feel your reward coming?" Garet held his arms out to his side as Ivan took a step away from his friend. "I don't let anything slide, Ivan."

The snow around them drew towards him in a similar way to how the man gathered flames, spiraling into a sphere hanging in front of him. The snowball grew as the ground around Garet turned green once more, grass sprouting up as if spring had arrived.

Only Garet did not stop at the same point he ended his fire spells. The snowball continued to grow, growing faster than the snow feeding it; in fact, Ivan had no idea where the man continued to drawn snow from anymore. But still the sphere grew.

His feet seemed trapped by the snow, locking him in his position as the snowball towered over him, passing two stories by now. The edges of the orb sparkled in the moonlight, glittering like eyes filled with laughter. Laughter at his misfortune.

The snowball began to roll, and as its shadow fell over Ivan, he could defend himself with naught but shouts.

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"You would place our most guarded treasure in the hands of a foreigner? We hid it away so that *none* could use it, much

less this child!"

"Only a relic from ancient times can stand against the ancients!"

"He was our enemy once before! Who's to say he won't turn on us again?"

"You would see the world die from your fear of action, you Valean!"

Piers placed his head in his hands, resting his elbows on the table. Proxians shouted at each other in increasing volumes, each seeking to make their point known. They gestured furiously as they grew louder, pointing frequently at Isaac, typically with great disgust.

Behind him, the fire crackled and burned brightly, casting an uncomfortable warmth on his back. He had learned during his previous time in the town that one's choices were to either shiver or sweat, and Proxians built their fireplaces accordingly. Though their natural resistance to the cold ensured they never felt it, if temperatures dropped enough, they would gradually become more fatigued, eventually falling unconscious and dying. Piers did not envy their unique trait; far better, he thought, to suffer the cold and be forewarned.

Trying to tune out the arguments, Piers stood up and turned around, looking around the house. Stone was difficult to come by this far north, as the ground was frozen throughout the majority of the year, so Proxians had crafted a thick, green pitch from local trees. They coated their wooden buildings in it, sealing gaps and adding a powerful layer of insulation to them.

Suddenly curious, Piers stepped away from the table and over to the nearest window. He looked at it carefully for a moment, then reached out and rapped a knuckle on the glass twice. Moving to the side and looking at it from as close to the wall as he could, he repeated the action, then nodded to himself. Not single-pane, of course; that would negate all work they had placed into their pitch. Not even double-pane, which provided well enough for the remainder of the world. Triple-pane was the Proxian standard, he noted, and the glass felt thick and strong. That made sense, he supposed. An entire civilization of Mars Adepts would be rather experienced with any trades involving fire.

He glanced back at the table, seeing a flurry of shaking fists and pointed fingers, Puelle attempting to mediate between the others, the elderly Altefeuer sitting back in his chair, calmly watching the catastrophe unfold before him, and Isaac attempting to slink as low in his chair as possible. Piers felt sorry for the young man. Felix would have been a far better choice, but circumstances had forced him elsewhere.

Turning away from the others, Piers crossed the room, pulled on his overcoat, and opened the door. The chill breeze that immediately flew in caused everyone to turn towards him, but he continued to ignore them and stepped outside, shutting it behind him. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his thick coat and looked around him.

Winter had come to Prox, marking the most dangerous time of year for them, but even so, it looked leagues better than it had previously. For one, he could see a number of great waterwheels turning in the current of the river, which evidently remained flowing year-round, barring cataclysmic winters. Though he found himself interested in the various ways Proxians had put them to use, he reined in that line of thought, sticking instead to his original one. Abandoning

one question for another would simply lead to a series of missing answers.

After asking for directions from the first person he came across, Piers made his way upstream, a light snow falling around him. The flakes danced through the sunlight in the breeze, making the air around him glitter, though he knew either the sunlight or snowfall would be short-lived. For the time being, however, he appreciated the beautiful calm surrounding him, treasuring his removal from that room.

They had arrived only hours before in Prox, finding its citizens rather unaware of their concerns. After meeting with Puelle, he explained to them that a great purple light had been seen to the north recently, briefly drowning out even the brilliant glow of Mars' beacon. Once Piers had explained to him the circumstances, he nodded in understanding. "Our village is only a single tree of the forest it once was," he said. "The entire north was once our domain. This is all that remains, to my knowledge."

However, when talk turned to Armageddon's blade, Puelle grew hesitant. Altefeuer advised him to call their town's council together if he was unsure, and the man agreed, stating that such an important decision should not be made alone.

They all arrived at Puelle's house almost two hours ago and had been arguing ever since.

Some concerns raised, both for and against looking for the blade, Piers knew to be valid. Some were just foolish, borne of fear and anger and misplaced pride. He knew Puelle had been right to call a council to make the decision, but he found himself growing increasingly irritated with their methods. Even given Isaac's rather unfortunate history with

the Proxians, he could likely have quelled much of the arguing. They held him in a mixed light; some despised him for being Valean, some despised him for his part on Venus Lighthouse, some forgave him for the tragic misunderstandings that had led him astray, and some had never liked Saturos or Menardi much anyway.

All of them, though, recognized the power he held. Though none spoke of it aloud, behind doors and around corners, whispers flew of the two deceased Mars Adepts and their study of ancient Alchemy, of how they applied those concepts to unlock the draconian blood that flowed, however thinly these days, through the veins of all Proxians. They knew Isaac had overcome the pair, and above all else, Proxians valued strength. Not simply physical strength, but all kinds: strength of mind and strength of heart were as equally valued.

Liked or disliked, Isaac held considerable influence in Prox, though he knew nothing about it. He still felt wary in the town, knowing what he had deprived them of. Piers knew he would never try to exert his will on them, for fear of a terrible backlash.

So it would come to him. Piers shook his head as he walked. He was no leader. To try and still the storm that raged across that table would have been no different than trying to stop a summer's hurricane. The momentum was too great, the ferocity too strong. If he wanted to still them, he needed to first drag them over land and put them out of their element. His walking out would serve to confuse and worry them, he expected, as he had been the one to explain the situation to them. After a short while, he would return and deal with them again.

In the meantime, however, he had turned his attention towards something that had piqued his curiosity.

He knocked on the door to the building, waited a moment, then pulled open the door and stepped inside from the cold. Though he found the custom of not waiting for the owner to admit one inside a bit uncomfortable, the weather quickly made him thankful for that small cultural difference.

A rush of hot air greeted him as he stepped inside, slightly laden with the smell of iron and coal. He blinked several times upon entering, finding the entrance dimly lit, a significant difference from the sun-kissed snow outside.

"Eh? Who's there?"

A dark figure appeared, tall and thick, framed by the orange glow in the rear of the smithy. "I apologize for coming uninvited, but I was looking for the blacksmith."

The figure stepped closer, allowing Piers to see a man squinting at him through the gloom. "Yeah, that's me. You that Alex fellow, ain't you? Thought you died, or something."

Piers smiled, shaking his head. "Definitely the 'or something.' But no, my name is Piers. Piers Seul, of Lemuria."

The blacksmith shook his hand. "You're one of little Felix's friends. Sorry about that, never met you, I guess. Name's Einion Favager. Need something from me?"

The question carried no accusation or impatience, just the brusque tone of a busy man. Piers immediately kicked himself for his thoughtlessness. "No, no, I apologize. I only wanted to talk, but I'm interrupting your work. I'll let you get back to it."

Einion grunted. "Don't have a lot of work at the moment. Just teaching some of the boys, but they can go without me for a bit. They know their stuff, and I ain't about to turn down a man who comes this far north. What can I do you for?"

Piers scratched the side of his chin absently. "Nothing important, to be sure. I was just curious about some aspects of Prox. I've started work to get trade reestablished between the continents, so I can't help but think about things when I see them now."

"Like?" Einion said, cocking his head slightly.

"Well...the waterwheels were one of them," Piers said slowly, still wondering how to get around to his real question without offending the man. "I'm familiar with their design, but I'm not used to seeing them in an area that tends no crops."

The blacksmith grunted again, a crooked smile appearing on his face. A flash of insight suddenly translated the sound into laughter to Piers, the man's reactions suddenly fitting more clearly. "Not just for milling, those wheels. Useful for a bunch of things. C'mere," he said suddenly, gesturing for Piers to follow.

The Lemurian moved through the shop, following Einion into the back, where various metal pieces hung on racks and lay on tables, in various states of work. Some looked merely dirty to Piers, likely just needing a final cleaning and polishing before being complete. Some looked as if they had been dropped from Mars' aerie...repeatedly.

"I break stuff sometimes to give the boys work," Einion explained, seeing him looking at a piece so completely

battered and warped that Piers could not even begin to guess its purpose. "Good practice. Keeps them busy."

Piers tore his eyes away from the twisted wreck and continued through the smithy, stopping with Einion a short distance away from a great forge. A comparatively small fire crackled in its center, but the two young men there ignored it, focused on their work at the anvil. One of them, looking to be slightly younger than Isaac, glanced up. "Oh, Ein, didn't hear you. Who's this?"

"One of the Dragonslayer's group," Einion said. "Just curious about the town. Keep working, and Terry, by Daedalus, switch out. Liam's got minutes before he's on the floor."

The first boy looked over at the one holding the hammer, as did Piers, finding him breathing rather heavily, drenched in sweat. "Damn it, Liam, say something!" he said, stepping over and taking the hammer from him. "Take a minute, grab some water, and we'll get back."

As Liam stumbled away slowly, Einion shook his head. "Keep an eye on your striker. Without him, you can't do anything." The man gestured to the side of the forge, where Piers could see a similarly large bellows. Behind it lay a complex construction of gears and axles, resting at the moment. "Connects up to the wheel. Lets us use the bellows automatically."

Piers nodded. "I assume the complexity is to allow different speeds at which to operate it?"

"Right," Einion said, then jerked a thumb at the anvil, where Terry waited.. "They don't get to use it, though. Little Terandi over there needs the muscle."

"Hey!" the boy shouted, patting his arms. "I've made a lot of progress!"

Einion grunted. "And you got a lot more to make still. Don't kill Liam while I'm gone."

As they walked back around to the front of the smithy, Piers asked quietly, "How long have you been smithing?"

"All my life," Einion said, leaning against a counter. "My father trained me. Hard, like I train them."

"Will they be able to handle it?" Piers asked. "Have you ever had anyone snap or break down?"

Einion shook his head. "If they couldn't take it, I wouldn't train them. Can't afford people losing it here. There'd be something else for them to do. Something more to their skills."

Piers nodded, more to himself. Prox had few enough people as it was, they needed to find ways to put everyone to effective use. People who became hurt, sick, or otherwise incapable of doing their jobs would simply be a drain on an already strained village. They had been recovering in the past year, he could see that much, but it would be many, many generations before their hard-won survival habits died out.

He turned to the side, looking at a number of completed works that decorated the front area. "Did you make these?" he asked, gesturing to a number of hanging pieces.

"I did," the man said plainly, with no hint of either pride or modesty. Just a fact.

Piers' eyes roved over them, seeing several metal tools, a small section of an iron gate, and what appeared to be a stove. As he moved on, though, they passed over a great sword. Almost instinctively he reached out for it, stopping himself just short of grasping the blade's handle. He snapped his hand back towards his chest and glanced behind him. "I apologize. I'm forgetting my place."

Einion snorted, shaking his head. "Never seen anyone so timid and bold at the same time. You know your way around a weapon, feel free. You cut yourself and it's your own fault."

"I understand. Thank you," Piers said, turning back and gently pulling the sword from the wall. It was longer than those he preferred, though he expected Garet would find it a comfortable length. Though Jenna often teased him for his love of enormous weapons, Piers had to admit, the man wielded them with enough terrifying force to rend small trees in two, but with enough precise finesse to write his name upon the fresh trunk.

But more than the size impressed Piers. Felix had taught him how to judge a blade, to get rough estimates of its durability and keenness, as well as its balance and comfort. While by no means did he consider himself an expert, Piers could tell that the sword would meet even Felix's high standards, possibly even exceed them.

Yet, to simply be hanging amongst a random assortment of tools and other mundane items, even in a smithy... Piers suddenly wondered if his question even needed asked, or even if Einion could answer it truthfully. He needed a different approach.

"This is an incredible blade," Piers said after a minute, looking at the blacksmith. "There must be a great story

behind it."

"Story? No," Einion said with a grunt. "That's my reminder to a valuable lesson: always check the count of what you need."

Piers raised an eyebrow. "You mean this sword was one of many?"

"Yeah. Some work for the warriors. Miscounted and wound up with that one left over."

He placed the sword back on the wall as gently as a mother setting down a baby. "So if you were to put all your effort in a blade, to make your best work, would you say-"

"Every work is my best work," Einion said sharply, faint traces of anger flickering across his face. "I never hold back effort."

Piers immediately held up his hands in an apologetic gesture. "Please, forgive me. I meant no offense. I've just...never quite met a blacksmith like you."

His words seemed to calm Einion, and the man's voice dulled to its typical roughness. "Forgot others smith for money. Here, we just need a smith. Poor tools only come back to hurt me as well."

"I spoke without thinking, and for that, I apologize," Piers said, bowing his head. As he did, however, he could not help but think about the implications. Many blacksmiths had little practice in working steel to the best of their ability, because few people paid for such high craftsmanship. Thus, they rarely raised their limits.

Here was a man who not only held a natural talent to aid him in smithing, his Mars Psynergy, but also the devotion and discipline to make his best the standard. Every time he worked, his limits rose ever so slightly, to the point that even such a high quality blade as the one Piers had just held was no more than a routine job for him.

Einion had to be, if not the best, among the best blacksmiths on Weyard. Though it would take time to confirm it, Piers doubted his question really needed an objective answer. He could see the quality for himself, and it would help develop Prox with the trade routes he had planned. He had no doubt that others had similarly worked their Psynergy into their trades, giving them leagues of advantage over tradesman from other cities.

"I should get back," Piers said at last, glancing at the door. "I have some heads to cool and egos to deflate."

"Must be a town meeting," Einion said, then shook his head. "Lemme know if it works. I've been trying for years."

As the man turned around to return to his apprentices, Piers asked, "Master Einion...if I were to able to establish trade lines, would you be willing to participate in it?"

"Ain't no master," the man said immediately, though Piers suspected the words were reflexive. After another few moments, the smith looked over his shoulder. "If it helps Prox, I'll do what I need to. Whatever I need to."

Piers nodded, though the motion went unnoticed by Einion, who continued on his way. Pulling his coat around him tightly, Piers stepped back into the rapidly cooling afternoon, shivering as he did so. As predicted, the sun had vanished behind thick, grey clouds that continued to pour snow down around him.

The blacksmith knew well the quality of his work. What he had displayed had not quite been modesty...not directly, at least. It had struck Piers more as a casual acknowledgment that his work was the best, because he worked for it to be so. There was no pride in the work itself, merely the effort that went into it.

His work would benefit Prox, to be sure. His tempered steel would bring food, cloth, and all manner of semi-necessities to the village. They could fend for themselves, of course, but he doubted any would object to a means to make life easier, or at least to direct their efforts at alternative lines of work.

Their main export would be steel, to be sure, supplemented by glass, as well as their various chemical constructs, like the green and black pitches. Who would need it? Loho was always in need of new tools, and the materials they mined could be put to use by Einion and his apprentices here, in turn. If he could convince Kraden to build a port west of Tolbi, on the Great Western Sea, then he could connect the two cities – a great boon for Prox, since he planned to make Tolbi and Kalay the center of the economical world. If everything fell into place, the two cities would explode on either side of the Karagol, expanding their borders rapidly and requiring more trade.

"Needed some quiet time?"

Piers looked up from his thoughts to find Isaac walking towards him, his scarf fluttering in the gentle breeze. "Not really. I just thought of something that was more important to me than listening to them argue."

Isaac grinned. "That's a lot of things, I think. What was it?"

"The town's blacksmith," Piers said, nodding his head behind him. "I wanted to see if Mars Psynergy made him better than

most."

Shaking his head, Isaac said, "We're deep in the northern wilds...again. Trying to save the world...again. And here you are, still thinking about your trade routes."

Piers shrugged, stepping beside the younger man. "We might save the world from the Anemoi, but we still need to save the world from itself. If we do nothing later, we may as well give Weyard over to the Anemoi now."

"What do you mean?" Isaac asked, glancing over as they began walking back towards Puelle's house.

He fell silent for a long moment, considering how to put his thoughts into words. He had set on this path some time ago, but rarely had to explain it to others. Most took it as a business entrepreneurship, never looking into it further than that. And why should they? It made sense to try and capitalize on Alchemy to restore the connections between civilizations.

After a minute he finally said, "The Wise One may have been cruel in his point, but it was valid. By returning Alchemy to the people of Weyard, we guarantee that they will eventually fall back into war. It may be in a year. It may be in a hundred years. It may be in thousands of years, but eventually, it will happen. World peace is only possible now because most are disconnected, but look what happens when they meet."

"Are you talking about when the Proxians came to Vale?" Isaac asked.

"Partially. Prox clashed with Vale. Kimbobo clashed with Madra. Tolbi and Lalivero. Champa and Izumo. Different cultures meet and when they disagree, they fight.

Sometimes no words are even exchanged. The only thing preventing war is the distance between them.

"Soon, though, that distance will lessen. Cities will grow, travel will become easier, and these interactions will occur more frequently. Individuals will become faces for their country, whether by choice or circumstance, and one man's actions will guide a country to glory or ruin. Such is the fate of civilization."

Isaac frowned, the crunching of the snow punctuating Piers' words. "What do you plan on doing, then? How will trade routes fix things?"

"By introducing people to each other in a controlled fashion, showing each that the other has something to give," Piers said, demonstrating an exchange with his hands. "It starts their relationship off on the right foot."

"But that won't last," Isaac said. "Like you said, eventually, one person is all it takes to mess everything up."

Piers nodded. "True. But if you're counting on another country to provide the stone for your walls, can you really afford to go to war with them? What about the country that supplies you with weapons?"

"So the idea is to make them reliant on each other?"

"Exactly," Piers said. "Imagine: a world unified, not by peace and love for one another, but by material necessity. Economies could be used to settle disputes, rather than lives. By binding them all together, I don't simply prevent them from killing each other; I prevent them from *wanting* to kill each other, which is far more valuable." He looked over at Isaac. "Never forget that. People will often fight you for

little reason when told to do something, but make them want to do it, and you will win almost every time."

Isaac nodded and the two fell back into silence. Piers began to wonder if Isaac had disagreed with his statement, or his reasons, or his mentality about the situation. There were too many possibilities, however, and dwelling on them would achieve nothing more than confusion and doubt.

When they finally entered Puelle's house once more, the room that made up the entire ground floor fell silent. Piers lingered in the doorway for a moment, slowly looking at each of the council members present, then stepped inside fully, allowing Isaac to close the door. He casually placed his overcoat back onto the wooden stand, rubbing his hands together as he turned back towards the table. "So. Are we all suitably cooled off? If anyone is not, I suggest a brisk walk outside. It's rather beautiful out at the moment."

"Do you patronize us, Lemurian?" one man asked. Piers recognized him as one of the store owners. "We are to decide whether or not the most powerful weapon in the history of Weyard is to be unleashed once more, and you mock us for discussing it at length?"

"Oh no, of course not," he said politely, spreading his hands in a peaceful gesture. "Though I may be accustomed to a more standard view of time, I am still Lemurian; I have plenty of patience for lengthy deliberations. However, I have very little patience for childish squabbling, which is what this has become."

The Proxian grew red of face, a feat which impressed Piers, given the man's already red skin. "Childish squabbling? You must be-"

"I would think about what you know of me carefully before finishing that sentence," Piers warned, waving a finger. "Else you might look like a terrible fool."

His mouth hung open in confusion for another second, then suddenly snapped shut, the man looking away. Piers turned towards the remainder and smiled. "Now, I have no desire to interfere with your politics. As you have said, the blade is a Proxian charge, and the decision to place that burden on another should be a Proxian decision. I will not make any attempt to sway your minds in either direction. All I ask is that a decision be reached, something which will never happen if you cannot talk about it reasonably. So I offer this ultimatum."

Piers cleared his throat and raised his voice, though the change in volume was unnecessary; not a sound could be heard in the room, save his words. "By dawn, I request that you make your choice. If you do not wish us to take the blade, we will leave and never speak of it again. If you will allow us to, I request some assistance in locating the blade, so that we may quickly employ its use. When our task is complete, we will return it here."

He paused for a moment. "However... If you cannot reach a decision in some fashion, then we will leave for the lighthouse and seek the blade ourselves, with or without your help. When we find the blade, then it will be as treasure-hunters, and the blade will remain in our hands."

Stepping back, he spread his hands to either side. "Esteemed members of the Proxian Council, I leave you to your decision." He subtly gestured for Isaac to follow, then strode past them, heading downstairs.

To his surprise, he found the basement pleasantly warm, despite being surrounded by the cold stone of Weyard on all sides. Another fire roared in a hearth down here, as well, and he once again found himself marveling at Proxian architecture.

Isaac followed behind him. "Was...that a good idea, Piers?" he asked hesitantly. "I mean, not trying to convince them to give it to us."

Piers shook his head, turning around. "Prox is a proud nation. They do not like interference from outsiders, so any attempt to influence them would be counter-productive."

"They never minded Felix," Isaac pointed out.

"I can only assume, but I believe that his time spent living here have made him, in their eyes, a Proxian by adoption, if not birth," he said. "But we won't get very far invoking his name unless he's with us, unfortunately."

Isaac sighed. "Well, I guess we'll just have to hope they decide to give it to us."

"Weyard needs to choose to save itself," Piers said, pulling off his boots and sitting down on a bed. "If we cannot undertake the risks necessary to turn back the Anemos, then we are already lost."

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Isaac paused, looking at the stone dragon perched beside the door. Its mouth was open in a vicious snarl, revealing a mouth full of carefully carved teeth. Wind had worn them down, but he suspected at the statue's completion, placing a hand inside the stone dragon's mouth would have a similar effect as with a live dragon.

He glanced up to find the dragon staring at him with a pair of inlaid rubies, glittering menacingly in the morning sun. The erosion had done nothing to dull the terrible glare set into the dragon's expression, however, and Isaac still expected the stone to suddenly crack and shatter, revealing a very live serpent beneath.

"Yeah, it's pretty. You going inside or not?"

Isaac glanced back briefly, mumbling a quick apology, then stepped past the stone sentinels into Mars Lighthouse. Instantly the cold vanished, leaving his body quite confused as it tried to adapt to the sudden change in temperature. He shook himself like a dog to throw off the loose flakes of snow he had gathered outside.

Behind him Piers stepped through the doorway, brushing the snow from himself in a much more dignified manner than Isaac, who felt numbly thankful Piers had been the only one to see his methods. The Lemurian looked around briefly, stepping beside Isaac, and said, "Well. I much prefer this lighthouse activated."

Puelle entered next, followed by the blacksmith, Einion. Neither man had any snow on him, low levels of Psynergy emanating from both, melting the snow as it touched them, then evaporating the water from their clothes. Isaac found himself slightly jealous of the Proxians; not only did they completely ignore all aspects of the cold, but he knew they used similar tricks for the heat, as well. Lamakan Desert had never quite faded from his mind, although it made the summer heat waves more bearable, knowing that the could, in fact, be worse.

"Hm." Einion glanced around the main chamber, then looked over at Puelle. "When summer comes, we oughta send some

people up to fix things. When we can, at least."

Puelle frowned thoughtfully. "I'd rather hold off on restoration of the lighthouse until we've actually reclaimed the area. Prox is going to need expansion within the next few years, and I'd like to get a village built right here to support it."

"Might need expanded sooner than that," Madrona said, stepping inside as well, glancing around. "Deaths are way down this winter, especially in newborns. If this keeps up, we'll be swimming in babies this time next year."

Isaac looked over in time to see the older woman flare her Psynergy, removing all the snow she had allowed to gather. Prox's most experienced midwife stood only to the middle of Isaac's chest, but from the moment she had entered Puelle's house earlier this morning, Isaac knew better than to cross her. She carried herself like a seven foot behemoth, capable of ripping lesser mortals' heads off with one hand.

He fully believed her capable of it, too.

Puelle had asked the two to accompany them, unsure of what they might find inside the lighthouse. He praised them both as not only skilled Adepts, but experts at using their Psynergy in unique ways. Isaac had a pretty good idea how Einion used his. He tried very had not to imagine how Madrona used hers.

"What?" the woman asked, snapping Isaac out of his thoughts. "Need something?"

He suddenly realized that he had been staring at her. "Oh, uh, no ma'am. Sorry."

She raised an eyebrow, then turned to Puelle. "Do people realize that this child is really so witless?"

Puelle frowned, but refrained from answering, obviously recognizing her verbal trap. Isaac felt his face turn red as he turned back around, finding Piers smiling slightly. "You make it too easy for her," the man said softly, so only Isaac could hear.

Isaac mumbled a response so quietly that not even he was sure what had been said, choosing to look around the chamber instead of at anyone else.

Einion snorted. "Which direction, then?"

After making a show of considering his options, Isaac turned back around with the question he had been planning to ask all along. "Do the legends say anything about where the sword might be hidden? Mars Lighthouse is pretty big, after all."

The blacksmith shrugged and glanced at Puelle. "Nothing I've heard."

Puelle pursed his lips, looking around as Isaac had. "Well, I've really only heard about it being hidden 'deep within the lighthouse.' I'd say that rules out the ancillary towers."

Isaac nodded. "They were pretty straightforward," he said. "I don't think they could have hidden much there."

"I expect we'll find it somewhere in the basement."

His shoulders slumped, remembering how deep into the ground Mars Lighthouse ran. They had obviously constructed it in much warmer times, to dig through the

permafrost that ran across the northern wilds. "Yeah, I had a feeling you would say that. Down we go, then."

As they crossed the central chamber, Isaac took the time to look around more. With the lighthouse having been active for a full year now, all ice had apparently vanished from it. All across the chamber he could clearly see the glittering green stones of the floor surrounded by the bright red stones of the walls, channeling the Mars Psynergy from Weyard to the beacon. Or was it the other way around? He shook his head; the basics of Alchemy were as far as he had gotten in his studies, and he had never resumed them after their journey, save what he taught himself in regards to his Psynergy.

Isaac stopped as they neared one of the walls, finding hieroglyphs covering the wall. As he neared, he could make out several different scenes: people surrounding a massive elk of some sort, people building ships along the coast, people kneeling down before a woman with wings.

"Who's that?" he asked, pointing at the woman.

Puelle glanced at the picture, then said, "Tiamat, queen of dragons. It's said that she chose the north for her domain because no one else would take it. Here she shaped ice into a man, then breathed life into him and took him as a lover. It was from them that the Proxians were born."

"A people of fire and ice," Piers muttered quietly. "Those that don't feel the cold, yet wield fire as they wish. A fitting birth for your culture."

Isaac began to glance further down the glyphs, but Piers tapped on his shoulder and shook his head. The young man nodded, understanding, and continued moving.

Over the next four hours they worked their way deeper and deeper into the lighthouse. Isaac had initially believed their navigation would be simple, given that he and Piers had crawled through the entire tower previously. Both underestimated the senseless and maddening layout of the lighthouse's hallways, however. It seemed as if the paths had been laid out specifically to confuse people, and once the thought occurred to Isaac, he realized it made sense.

The thought did little to improve his mood.

Eventually, and Isaac doubted they had improved on their previous time at all, they found the last staircase. Isaac stared at it numbly for a moment, consulting his mental map for their current floor, then let out a whoop. "Hey, this is it! We found it!"

Madrona walked over, eying the stairs suspiciously. "You're sure? There's only one level beneath us?"

"Three floors below ground," Isaac said firmly. "Trust me, I remember that much."

"Much? Given the extensive tour of the lighthouse you've brought us on, I'd hardly call that 'much,'" the woman said.

"Stop that, Ma," Puelle said sharply, standing in front of the stairs. "I'll have no disrespect in this room. Understood?"

Madrona nodded. "Of course."

Isaac spared a quick glance at Piers, but the Lemurian's face remained impassive as he motioned for the others to proceed first. Only once all of them had entered the stairwell did his eyes meet Isaac's, his head shaking in the barest of motions.

The Valean nodded, following the other man downstairs. He knew all too well why Felix had told the Proxians the story he did.

They continued down the hallway in silence, the only sounds that of their boots on the stone and the bubbling of magma beneath them. No sign of the blade had been found thus far; Isaac wondered how likely it would be for them to find anything concerning it here. The chamber was the deepest one in the lighthouse, used to channel the Mars energy from deep underground up through the construction, not for the hiding of legendary blades.

The footsteps stopped as they entered the reached the top of the stairs leading into the chamber proper. The three Proxians had halted, looking forward in a respectful silence. After a few moments, Puelle stepped forward, then turned around. "This is where it happened, then?"

Isaac simply nodded.

Puelle turned back around, eying the three dragon head statues along each wall. "...It is said that when Tiamat first gave birth, dragons and Proxians were all the same. Over time, some forgot how to become a dragon, while some forgot how to be human."

He walked over to the center of the room, kneeling down on the stone amidst the three statues. "It is a great tragedy when Proxians are forced into battle against a dragon, our long-lost brothers. A sad affair indeed."

"There are no records of any dragon successfully transforming into a human," Madrona said quietly to them, though her voice carried in the tall chamber. "It's believed that their minds are now lost completely. Felix did the beast a favor by slaying it. You all did."

Isaac swallowed thickly, feeling his throat tighten as he fought to keep his face as calm and composed as Piers'. "I...I wish we could have saved them. We tried, but..." He trailed off, shaking his head.

"I wish that too," Puelle said softly. "Not a day goes by that I regret letting her make this trip."

"She and Agatio died to a dragon," Einion said. "I can think of no greater opponent to fall to."

"I would have preferred them both to have lived to old age and died in their sleep," Puelle snapped suddenly, not looking back at the other man. "They should have been the ones committing *my* soul to the flames."

"It was not their nature," the blacksmith said firmly, resting his hand on Puelle's shoulder in a contrasting gentleness. "They would never have allowed themselves to die as old women in their beds. They chose their cause, and died well. No warrior could ask for a better end."

Puelle sighed. "I know. This place just...makes me wish there had been another-"

A high-pitched screech dug into Isaac's ears, amplified by the chamber's construction. He spun around completely, looking in every direction, and found the source slithering towards them along the path they had walked earlier. The thick mass of light red scales screeched again, rearing up as it approached Isaac.

The young man barely gave the snake a second thought, his hand flying to his sword and drawing it in one smooth motion, the blade shearing through the snake with a spray of dark blood. He watched both halves of the monster fall to the ground, then turned around, walking up the stairs as he

sheathed his sword, making a mental note to clean the blade when they left.

He had barely turned around before Madrona's arm reached out, snatched the front of his cloak, and jerked him forward. Before he could open his mouth to protest, she spun him around again.

At the base of the stairs, the body of the snake writhed, as if in agony. As Isaac watched, the bloody stump pushed outwards, then split, three snakes wiggling and squirming from inside the dead one. After a few seconds, though, he realized the snake was not opening up to reveal three new ones – three new heads had simply grown in the original's place.

His mouth fell open. He had no words to describe what he watched, and all available concentration had been directed towards keeping his stomach stable; seeing the flesh and blood tear and spray in such a horrific fashion had disturbed the natural order of things in his own body.

"It's a hydra!" Madrona shouted over her shoulder, pushing Isaac further back as Puelle and Einion stepped forward, the latter stretching his fingers. "Every time you remove a head, three more grow in its place!"

"One of *those* again," Piers muttered, stepping forward as well. "Good to know."

With another screech, the hydra practically flew up the steps, its body undulating endlessly in its charge. Puelle and Einion stepped back, Mars Psynergy pooling around them, but before they could work the power into any form, the hydra's mouths opened, spitting flaming liquid out towards them.

The two Adepts moved to opposite sides of the chamber to avoid the burning saliva, which the hydra took advantage of, flying forward towards Isaac. It obviously didn't care much for the beheading, he realized wryly.

He raised his hand, pulling stone up from the floor to block the serpent's path. It crashed headlong into the bricks, hissing furiously at the Valean, then darting around as Isaac frantically tried to shift his barriers.

The hissing continued as the surprisingly agile snake matched speed with Isaac, who continually shifted the rock around to stop the creature as the Proxians made their way back up the stairs. After watching the hydra slam into its third barrier, it reared back and hissed at him again.

In that instant Isaac realized the constant hiss had not been the hydra, but the tracks of black pitch in the chamber as they ignited. Felix had explained to him the material once, how it ignited, melted, then interacted with the air somehow to make it ignitable once again. He had not fully understood what Felix had been talking about, so Garet summarized it – black pitch was a reusable bomb fuse.

That bomb fuse had just been lit again.

"Get back!" he screamed, throwing a wave of unfocused telekinetic energy forward at Puelle and Einion as he pulled Madrona back, throwing his other arm out to push Piers back. On either side, the jeweled eyes set into the great dragon heads flashed briefly, filling the room with their light. In the next moment, Mars Psynergy poured from their mouths in the form of pure combustion energy.

A great explosion rocked the chamber and Isaac felt the floor shudder briefly. He had just enough time to realize how thin the stone beneath him really was before it gave way,

collapsing beneath his feet. A great rush of hot air greeted him, as well as a pit of darkness, reaching up and swallowing him entirely.

As he fell he closed his eyes, reaching out with Psynergy. Stone. All around him, including the ground that was-

Isaac landed on the stone floor on his side painfully, rolling once before stopping. He could no longer feel his arm below the elbow, where it had struck the ground. Ignoring it for the moment, he shifted around, pushing himself up with his good arm and peering around the dark chamber they had landed in. "Piers? Anyone?"

"I'm here," the Lemurian said from a short distance away, accompanied by the clattering of loose stone.

"Over here," he heard Madrona say from the other side, the room quickly lighting up as flames appeared in her hands. She had already reached Isaac by the time he turned to her, ushering him over to Piers quickly. "Stay together, now. It's down here with us."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than another ear-piercing screech filled the chamber. Out of the darkness lurched the snake heads, dragging along their malformed body behind them. Isaac moved to redraw his sword, wanting something to defend himself with, while he noticed Piers reaching behind him for his Trident.

Madrona simply moved forward, her flames falling to the ground. Her hand flashed out three times as she approached the hydra, a dagger appearing as if from nowhere. One slash saw the throat of one head slit, the second saw a great gash sliced up another neck, while the central head quickly found a blade shoved directly up into its skull.

The creature gurgled once, but when Madrona ripped her blade free, blood and a green, viscous liquid leaking from the wound. Before Isaac could even ask what it was, the midwife flicked her free hand towards the small pool growing at the ground, small flickers of flame falling into it.

Instantly the trickle burst into flame, moving up the dangling green strand with ease. In the next moment, the hydra's head had caught fire, though Isaac knew the creature had already perished.

Madrona stepped away from the burning corpse, turning around and examining her knife. Flames danced along the edge of the blade, which was now tinted slightly green. "Huh," the woman said, looking over the dagger carefully. Pulling the sheath out of her sleeve with her other hand, she shoved it back inside, examining the opening. Upon finding no flames emerging from inside, she pulled the blade back out, and it instantly ignited upon contact with the air.

"Huh," she said once more. "That's pretty interesting. Must've hit the flame sac." She turned around and poked the lizard with her foot, then backed away. "It's a bit tragic, really: they grew and gained the ability to breath fire, but they never quite solved their problem with having such combustible blood. They kill themselves and each other constantly because of it."

Isaac looked at the fallen lizard, then up at the woman. "That...that was..."

The woman simply smiled at him, sheathing the blade on the inside of her wrist once more. "Midwifing is more than just delivering babies here. Close your mouth, you'll let in a breeze I don't think you can afford."

Feeling a bit foolish, Isaac snapped his hanging mouth shut as Piers laughed. "Come, let's find out where we are. The others are worried, I wager."

Madrona raised her hand, a bright glow spreading from it and illuminating the chamber, the only other light filtering down from high above. A pair of small dots appeared in the hole, making Isaac wonder just how far they had fallen. "Is everyone alright?"

"We're fine," Madrona called out, looking all around her. "The hydra's dead. We're going to take a look around down here, so wait a little bit for us."

"We'll come down too," Isaac heard Puelle say, but Madrona's voice cut across the chamber once more.

"No. We're lucky enough that no one hurt themselves on that fall. No need to press our luck there."

Isaac shook his head. "It's fine, I can get them down." Turning around before the woman could question or protest, he reached into the ground beneath him, slowly pulling the stone from its normal alignment. With another part of his mind, he pulled portions of the wall out as well, assisting his construction. When the stone finished shifting, a makeshift staircase had appeared, leading up to the broken floor. He rolled his mind over it once, smoothing and straightening segments that needed touched up, then shouted, "Alright, come on down."

As the other two descended, Madrona flung small flames around them. They landed amongst the loose rubble around them, flickering brightly and casting everything in a red hue. Given how most of the stone used in the lighthouse had already been dyed red, though, Isaac could not be sure how much had actually been tinted by the lighting. He wiped his

forehead, only just now realizing how hot this chamber was, far warmer than the remainder of the lighthouse.

When she finished, she turned towards Isaac, staring at him pointedly. He fought the urge to shrink away from her steel gaze, though he could not stop his shoulders from raising slightly in instinct to better shield his neck. She snorted at the motion, grinning. "Looks like you're not completely hopeless after all."

With that said, she turned away and began walking in the only direction that did not show a wall reflecting her flames' flickers. The soft patter of boots on stone behind him told Isaac that the others had reached the bottom, so he simply followed her as she continued to both light their way and leave a trail behind.

Unlike before, they walked in silence this time, winding down along a gentle spiral path. Isaac knew none of them, including himself and Piers, had seen this level of the lighthouse before. He had heard of alterations being made to large buildings, sometimes accidentally sealing off chambers. Such events tended to give rise to rumors of people trapped inside, across the world.

People...or perhaps a sword.

An idea suddenly struck him. What if this chamber had originally been open, but had been sealed when the Proxians hid the sword away? What better way to prevent people from finding something than to leave no path leading to it?

He would never be able to say one way or the other, for sure. He doubted any hard evidence of the chamber's purpose would be evident after all these years, if present at all. Piers

would likely be interested in hearing about his theory, though, so he filed the thought away for later.

Onto more pressing issues.

"What is that *smell?"* he asked, wrinkling his nose.

Einion grunted from behind him. "Brimstone. Smells like death and ass."

"We're near a wound in Weyard," Piers said, pointing forward. "Look, you can see the glow on the rocks ahead."

Sure enough, when Isaac blocked Madrona's flame from his vision, he could see the slight red tint on the rocks at the furthest reach of the bend. As they continued forward, the glow became more and more prominent, eventually allowing the woman to douse her Psynergy entirely.

Shortly after she did so, the spiral path ended, as did the brick pathway, opening up instead into a great, underground cavern. If sweat had not already covered Isaac's body, he probably would have simply shriveled upon the blast of hot air that accompanied the sight.

An endless pool of magma stretched out from their rocky beach, bubbling and murmuring to them softly. Reds and golds filled the cavern, obliterating all other colors, including the ones they had worn. Islands of stone jutted upward among the molten sea, lingering remnants of the land that had once been here.

Isaac's eyes gravitated towards one in particular as something caught his eye: white. As the air shimmered and wavered in the intense heat, however, he could see nothing. Still, he knew *something* had caught his eye, something

other than the various forms of rock. He had a sneaking suspicion he knew what it was, too.

"So, let's say I wanted to hide something dangerous away from the world," he said slowly. "And that I wanted to hide it in a place where only my people could get to."

Madrona turned around slowly, nodding. "We've been fools. Why keep such a blade at all? Whatever apocalypse it held has been returned to Weyard's blood."

Puelle nodded grimly, but Isaac shook his head. "No. They either couldn't unmake it, or wouldn't. It doesn't matter." He raised his hand and pointed at the round island straight ahead. "What matters is currently waiting there."

The other four all followed his finger, staring out across the magma's surface. "I see nothing," Einion said.

"I did," Isaac said. "Something white. A reflection."

Puelle looked back at him dubiously. "It could simply be a piece of ore, worn smooth by the magma."

Isaac opened his mouth to object, but Piers spoke up instead, shaking his head. "No, I agree with Isaac. The Proxians would not have destroyed such a powerful weapon, nor made it completely unavailable. They would have ensured that only they could use it, if they deemed it necessary, and this seems like the ideal place for such a task. Watch."

The Lemurian stepped forward towards the magma, Mercury Psynergy radiating off him in waves to cool the air around him. Isaac briefly envied his four companions. With a wave of his hand, Piers called fresh water from the air, though Isaac could see it sapped him greatly; Mars and Venus ruled

this deep beneath the surface. The water fell straight onto the magma a short distance in front of Piers, instantly bursting into steam.

The man held out his hand, pulling all the steam towards him to clear the view. Instead of the hardened magma Isaac expected to sea, nothing had changed. Either the water had not been able to cool it sufficiently for it to solidify, or it had simply remelted instantly. Regardless of the reason, Piers' point had been made – not even a Mercury Adept could hope to reach the sword.

Isaac turned to Puelle. "I can't raise the stone beneath it with all that magma over it. It's too heavy. I need you to shift it for a few seconds, long enough for me to raise a bridge."

"Won't work," Einion said from behind them. "Rock will be too weak. It'll melt again too fast."

The young man glanced back at the island, swallowed, then turned to the Proxians again. "How much magma do you think you can hold back?"

Madrona's mouth bent into a frown. "Idiot. Even if that red sea could be parted, you'd be dead in seconds from the heat alone."

"Not necessarily." Piers crossed his arms, tapping his fingers thoughtfully. "I could protect him from the heat, at least for a short while. Enough for him to get there and back, for sure."

Puelle shook his head. "I don't like this. One mistake on any of our parts and you'd be dead in an instant. We don't even know if the sword is there."

"I do," Isaac said firmly. "I know what I saw, and I'm willing to take that risk. We need this sword. I'm not about to turn

back now."

The midwife looked at him curiously. "No? You intend to walk through a pool of magma to reach this blade? You intend to trust your life to four people, knowing that if one of them fails, you will burn until nothing is left? You have the foolish pride of the young, Valean. You think yourself invincible. Placing your life in the hands of people you've known for half a day is unspeakable stupidity."

Isaac stared back at her, though he fidgeted uncomfortably under her stare. "I've learned firsthand the determination a Proxian holds. I know that you'll collapse before you willingly surrender to your own exhaustion. I ask you: do you believe you are capable of getting me there?"

Madrona continued to stare at him for a long moment, her expression now unreadable. A magma bubble popped off to the side, splattering across the molten sea, but none of the Adepts paid it the slightest bit of attention. The woman eventually flicked her eyes away from Isaac, settling them on Einion. She stared silently at the blacksmith for a moment, then shifted her piercing gaze to Puelle. Her eyes remained fixated upon him for longer than Einion, but after a few moments more, she looked back at Isaac. "I do," she said at last.

Isaac turned to Einion, who merely nodded, then to Puelle. The man sighed, glancing at his two fellow Proxians briefly, then nodded as well. "I do."

"Then unless anyone has a better idea, I think we should go ahead with this plan," Isaac said, glancing around at the three. "If all of you say you can get me there, then I know Charon would have to personally visit if he wanted to bring me back."

"And a simple Mercuric aura will shield you from the heat?" Madrona asked, though her voice lacked the light scorn it carried earlier. "Such protection will only last minutes against this heat, if that."

Isaac shook his head. "I'll make it fast, so we don't run into any issues."

Einion raised an eyebrow. "You're going alone?"

"No offense, but it's probably better if everyone else stayed here and focused," he said. "Last thing we need is someone tripping and interrupting their concentration."

Puelle continued to frown, but nodded. "I still don't like it, but if you are set on this path, then I will not try and divert you. Instead, I pray that Tiamat protects you on your way."

"Tiamat won't be the one protecting him," Madrona said gently. "We will. Better to pray to her for strength."

The three Proxians stepped closer to the magma and Piers turned towards Isaac, speaking quietly. "Are you certain about this?" When Isaac simply nodded, Piers sighed. "Then I will do everything I can to shield you. You won't have long. A few minutes, at most."

"I won't need much," Isaac said firmly.

Three great pulses of Psynergy raced through the chamber, resonating with each other in a harmony that shook Isaac slightly with its potency. The magma churned once at the beach, then ebbed outward, leaving behind a blackened, steaming chunk of rock. It continued to push away from the trio of Proxians, creating an indent in the red ocean.

Isaac glanced up at Piers, who clapped a hand firmly on his shoulder. "I'll be with you," he said, and the Valean suddenly felt a cool mist coat his body. The temperature of the chamber dropped significantly to a spring morning's chill, causing him to shiver slightly.

Stepping forward, he found the chill quickly banished as he crossed the black line that marked the pool's edge. He could feel the heat through his boots, reminding him of the dark stones his friends used to climb on in the summer. Garet and Jenna would have competitions to see who could stand on the heated rocks the longest; Isaac always quickly became a non-competitor.

Suddenly he found himself wishing he had tried harder on their games, building up the tolerance the other two had. He never let his feet sit against the ground for very long, feeling as if they might catch fire, even with Piers' protection.

The dimple pressed forward, as did Isaac, feeling the ground slope down beneath him. The walls of molten rock rose above him as he willed the Proxians to push it forward faster. His silent request was met instead by the closing of the gap behind him, which he noticed only when the heat against his back grew suddenly.

He faced forward again. Now, truly, he was at Mars' mercy. All around him the magma bubbled and strained against the Psynergy holding it back. How much magma had they displaced? Mia had explained to him once that while moving water was fairly simple, pushing part of a body of water aside required far more effort. Not only did she have to move the water, she had to push the remainder of the surrounding water simultaneously, displacing it enough to have a place.

She could at least freeze it once that was done. Any attempt to solidify the molten rock would be futile; freezing it would be even worse. He had seen what happened when something very hot became very cold very quickly.

He hopped from one foot to the other as the bubble of safety moved onward. The island had appeared fairly close, though the distance had been distorted slightly by the heat, but Isaac suspected that thinking about how close it was would only lengthen the trip in his mind.

Sweat dribbled into one of his eyes. He reached up to wipe it away and found his entire face soaked, Piers' Psynergy hiding that as well. He patted down his neck experimentally and found it coated in sweat also.

Now his eyes had begun hurting, as well. Though the heat had certainly been diminished, the brilliant glow of the magma, especially so close, radiated with full force all around him. Everywhere he looked, bright orange filled his vision.

And then all of a sudden, it didn't.

Isaac blinked a few times, trying to clear the afterimage and figure out what had happened. After a few seconds, he realized he had reached the island – a sheer wall of black rock before him. He turned his head up, seeing the lip well above his jumping distance.

He glanced back briefly, judging his distance to the wall of magma behind him, which had thankfully stopped advancing, then reached forward with his mind, pulling stairs out from the black wall. He climbed them rather quickly, then turned around and waved towards the shore. The magma immediately collapsed back into the hole, burying his staircase in the golden liquid. Isaac quickly

jumped back as the magma splashed up slightly, but it never came close to him.

Keeping Piers' words in mind, he turned around to search the small island, but searching proved pointless – impaled directly into the center of the oddly circular platform was a sword, buried nearly to the hilt in the stone.

Isaac could not help but gape at the blade. It had to be at least twice as wide as the broadswords Garet favored, and he had no idea how deep the blade ran. Some enormous gem sat in the center of the guard, reflecting the orange of the magma.

The young man shook his head; there would be time to admire it later. Stepping forward, he spread his feet wide and squatted down, taking hold of the large hilt with both hands. He took one deep breath, then jerked upwards, pulling with every ounce of strength in his body.

The blade refused to budge, so Isaac decided to cheat.

The rock holding the blade cracked slightly, opening up and allowing the sword to rise with ease. Isaac watched as the glittering steel continued to rise from the ground, never seeming to end. As his legs straightened and the pommel just passed the top of his head, the tip finally emerged, much to Isaac's relief.

In the next instant, though, the rock beneath him shuddered something fierce, nearly throwing him to the ground. Part of it then abruptly dropped several inches, making Isaac realize in an instant his mistake. Hadn't Einion even warned him about adjusting the rock? In using Psynergy to shift it, he opened it up to being melted by the magma. He confirmed with a quick sense that the island had indeed lost a considerable portion of its structure, including the middle

where the sword had been lodged, where he had so recklessly shattered the rock.

The magma bubbled up as the platform dropped another few inches, a glob popping up near his feet. He backed away from it, only to find the other side dropping as well. Not good.

Well, if he had already wrecked the platform's base, he might as well finish the job.

Reaching down with his mind, he shattered the remaining portions, turning the island into a stone raft. He knew it would be a minute, perhaps, before the magma ate the remainder and moved on to claim him. He saw dimples forming in the magma in front of him, courtesy of the Proxians, but they didn't have the strength to shift all that magma from nothing. They would have to move a bubble from shore to get one there.

No time. Reaching down with his mind, he knew he would never be able to move his island to the beach in time. Instead he slipped past the island, past the magma, reaching for the old, hardened stone beneath it. He winced at his plan for a moment before starting it, taking comfort in the fact that if he died, it would at least be a quick death.

The ground beneath the magma cracked and trembled, shifting as seismic energy ripped through it. The effect on the surface was instantaneous: the magma bucked and heaved as vents opened beneath it, rocking the stone island Isaac stood on.

When a geyser of magma appeared a short distance away, Isaac wondered, not for the first time that day, if his idea had been terribly foolish. Some vague memories of Kraden's

lectures surfaced in his mind, briefly mentioning pockets of highly pressurized molten rock beneath Weyard's surface.

They were very quickly overridden by thoughts of how to get the island to shore and *get the hell out of there.*

Abandoning all sense of caution, Isaac reached his mind beneath him and punched through the stone shell he had already fractured. The resulting eruption of magma very nearly capsized his island, ending everything there. He crouched down and placed a hand on the stone, instantly regretting it as he jerked it back from the intense heat. Instead he drew his sword, planting the tip into the rock and steadied it, praying that a stray gout of magma didn't decide it wanted his spot.

The eruption's wave pushed the island forward, moving smoothly towards the shore. He saw the others backing away, moving back up the stairs, and he felt Piers protection flicker briefly. It dimmed only for a second before restoring itself, but in that second, the heat struck Isaac like a hammer to the chest, taking his breath away.

In the next instant the cool barrier had returned, though the thick, suffocating sensation stuck with Isaac. As he approached the shore, rather than try and risk another eruption to push him the remainder of the distance, he gathered the stone up beneath him, then thrust it forward sharply. He flew into the air, carefully holding the two swords close to him as he landed on his side, rolling over their flat edges.

He rose to his feet immediately. "Okay, got it, time to go!"

The others needed little prompting as another burst of magma erupted from the pool's surface, the entire chamber rumbling from deep beneath them. They took the spiral

hallway at a sprint, dashing back up to the hidden chamber in a fraction of the time it had taken them to descend.

Isaac glanced over his shoulder and found the orange glow following them. "Dammit," he muttered, turning around completely. Dropping his newly acquired sword to the ground, he gripped his original blade with both hands, thrusting it into the mortar between the bricks at his feet. It pierced the filling with ease, amplifying his Psynergy as he called out to the stones of the lighthouse.

He felt the Mars Psynergy pulsing through them as they shifted and he prayed it would be enough. The entrance to the spiral pathway wavered at the edges, then shifted inward as bricks moved around. The opening continued to shrink until the doorway and the walls were indistinguishable from each other.

A tense few moments passed as he felt the massive Mars power behind the wall grow, and grow, and grow...but after an eternity, it stopped growing. He could still feel the high concentration, likely because magma had flooded the entire tunnel, but it seemed that the bricks would hold.

Turning around once more, he promptly sat down on the floor, leaning back on his hands. A short distance away, he saw each of the others showing significant signs of fatigue as well, though not all of them were as blatant about it.

Safe from the magma now, Isaac leaned his head back, staring up at the partially destroyed ceiling. His mind finally caught up with him, and it only had one question.

Hadn't he done all this before?

Chapter 12: Shadows of Doubt

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 12 – Shadows of Doubt

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The bells began to clang, the metallic rings echoing throughout the ship. Not singly, slowly, to signify the time. Not in pairs, to signify their captain leaving, which would have been rather difficult at any rate, this far out to sea. The bells rang in one continuous, steady tolling, never ending, never changing. One after the other. Dong. Dong. Dong.

The bells called for battle stations.

Ivan flew to the porthole, nearly slamming his face into the glass as he pressed up against it, the source of the alarm evident in the dim lantern light. The faint silhouette of another ship loomed in the darkness, moving towards them slowly, their banner barely visible atop their mast. Emblazoned on it was the six-pointed star - the chosen mark of the pirate lord known only as Deadbeard.

In the next moment he had grabbed his sword and thrown open the door, dashed down the hallway and outside, then vaulted the railing to land on the main deck. Others had already arrived, arming themselves similarly, grim looks of hopeless determination fixed on their faces.

Ivan stood with them, blade drawn, watching as the pirate ship approached and pulled alongside. He could see no movement on the other ship's deck, save the flapping of the

sails, yet the vessel continued to move as if guided by an unseen hand.

Then the darkness shifted. As if stepping through a thick bank of fog, a figure appeared opposite the boy on the other ship, stepping out of the black. Bound in thick, golden armor that seethed with an angry, red aura, Deadbeard stepped to the railing, yellow eyes staring out coldly at them all.

The wind whistled through the gap between the two hulls, fluttering the King of Pirates' cape behind him. After a long moment, the armored figure held out one hand in an offer for others to take it, the other settling rather pointedly onto the pommel of the great blade sheathed at his waist.

His question was met with an arrow, loosed from the bow of a man to Ivan's left. The arrow bounced harmlessly off the spirit's armor, a metallic 'ping' the only indication it had even touched him. Deep, resounding laughter came from beneath the pair of glowing eyes, Deadbeard's mouth cracked wide open.

A burst of bright, red light forced Ivan to turn to his right, shielding his eyes as waves of heat washed over him. When it died down a moment later, he glanced to his left to find a black scorch mark on the deck where the archer had stood seconds before, nothing but a few ashes remaining to be carried off by the wind.

Deadbeard's laughter ceased and again he held out his hand, offering his choice: the black behind him, or the black on the deck.

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Mia stared up the hills towards Contigo for several long minutes, but when she turned around to face them again,

she simply shook her head. "I don't see any guards at all, or anything. Just the occasional passerby."

"Perhaps they're hidden?" Alex suggested.

Mia merely shrugged. "Possible, I suppose, but I saw nothing that would suggest it."

"Other than the complete lack of guards," Jenna muttered, glancing up the hill also. "We also don't know what sort of connection Anemos has to the city."

"Though this would be a good opportunity to examine Anemos' defenses," Alex said thoughtfully. "While we're here, we should take the opportunity to investigate the city as much as possible. Within a safe reason, of course."

"We still need to get into Contigo," Ivan said. "We can work from there."

Alex tapped his chin, then turned to Mia. "Are you comfortable enough with warping to do it right now?"

She nodded, absently rubbing her stomach. Though they had just arrived, the ginger tea she had prepared in Tolbi that morning had helped settle it considerably.

"Then you and I shall make a circle through the city," he continued. "If anything happens, we warp back here and try to get as far away as possible."

Mia glanced over at Jenna and Ivan, then back to Alex. "We can carry one other with us, correct?"

"Yes, just one. Aha," he said, glancing over at the others in understanding. "Yes, I suppose there's no point in just the two of us going. Shall we all go together, or in pairs?"

"Pairs," Mia said. "Faster to cover the city that way. If one of us finds trouble, shout out and we'll meet back here."

"I'll go with Alex," Jenna said, glancing over at Ivan. "Where are we regrouping?"

Ivan chewed on his lip thoughtfully for a moment, glancing up the hill, then said, "At my sister's house. It's far enough into the city that if we don't see any Anemoi by then, we probably won't."

Jenna nodded, then turned around. "All right, we'll see you there. Come on, pretty boy."

Alex frowned at her back, but said nothing, much to Mia's amusement, following the young woman up the hill. Not bothering to fight down her smile, she gestured to Ivan. "Let's go. You lead, you know the town better."

They started up the hill in silence, mirroring Jenna's path. As they walked Mia glanced behind her, looking across the Attekan landscape. Miles and miles of jungle lay below them, instantly bringing back memories of its sweltering mugginess. Mia had once thought she would never find a climate worse than Lamakan Desert, but their first visit to Contigo had banished that thought.

"I'm not sure how Hama can stand living here," she admitted, pulling at her shirt to fan herself. "The humidity just saps all my strength."

"I know," Ivan said, nodding. "They usually take a nap in the early afternoon, when things are the hottest, but I could never sleep easily in this."

"That's smart," Mia said. "Maximize work in the cooler portions of the day. We do the opposite. No one leaves their

house until the sun's been up for at least an hour, and the time of sunset is carefully tracked."

As they crested the hill, passing the first building on the outskirts of Contigo, Mia swept her eyes across the plateau. It appeared to be much of the same that she had seen already – not a single guard, or even anyone armed with anything more than a hunting knife.

Granted, the number of people she saw was minimal. Here and there she could see someone moving at a moderate pace towards their destination, glancing frequently towards the opposite end of the city. Towards Anemos.

That made sense, she realized. For all she knew, most of the city might well be abandoned. The city certainly did not look like a prison camp, however, nor the site of a hard-fought battle. Merely quiet. A slight tension hung in the air, carried on the silence, like the approach of a afternoon rain. Only the sound of the wind could be heard as it ruffled her clothes and hair, rolling in from the northwest.

"Is it always this empty?" she asked Ivan, her voice sounding strange in the quiet town.

The boy shook his head. "No, there's usually people everywhere. People coming in from the fields, or wherever they're working. It's usually really loud, actually, with all the children running around before dinner. This is a bit...spooky."

Mia nodded slowly, looking around. She could see candles or lanterns being lit in some of the buildings in preparation for the coming dark, most appearing to be houses. As they passed across the main road into the town, however, she spotted the unmistakable loom of a great inn a short distance away. *Probably not much business right now,* she thought glumly.

They continued on in a tense silence, Mia remembering the time she and Alex had crept into Mister Gerik's workshop one evening as children. They had long wondered what sort of things the carpenter worked on in the privacy of his shop, and with the intrusive curiosity of the young, it had eventually come to a nighttime expedition to see for themselves.

She had known that sneaking into the workshop was wrong, of course, but she reasoned to herself that if no one knew about it, it would never matter. Nevertheless, she had not been able to shake the oppressive way the shadows pressed in on her as they crept between the workbenches and tables, despite the awe she felt at some of the things she saw. It settled on the back of her neck, pulling up the hair there, and thinned her chest, making the beat of her heart so much more evident. Every small sound seemed like a crash, every shape Mister Gerik, lurking in wait for the children that he somehow knew would sneak inside.

He *had* figured them out, eventually, after Alex's trip over the corner of a stool sent both wood and boy crashing to the ground in an unceremonious heap. Though they escaped before the carpenter could reach the workshop, the lingering glance he gave the boy the next day had not escaped her.

Granted, Alex had earned himself such a reputation as a young boy, so even had it been some other child, Mia doubted the man would have suspected anyone different.

The same feeling of disquiet and unease wrapped around her now like a thin blanket, just heavy enough for her to feel its fabric caress her shoulders and hands. She found herself unable to continue breaking the silence, not quite able to shake the absurd thought that speaking over the wind's murmur would bring the wrath of the Anemoi upon them.

They followed the road for a short while, though they turned off before they could reach the great plaza at Contigo's heart. Even from their distance, however, she could see a few people milling about in the circle, stopping off at a few stalls. Not even the Anemoi could stop the daily market, she supposed.

The houses began to grow more clustered together as they walked down a side-street, her eyes continuing to dart around her. She picked out useful ambush points as they passed between houses, bracing herself for a swift attack, but none came. She began to wonder if perhaps the Anemoi had taken up barracks in the local houses; she had heard of armies doing that on campaigns before. Windows became her new target of interest, searching them for any sign of Anemoi hidden inside.

As they approached one of the houses, Mia saw one of the window's curtains waver briefly, drawing her eyes to a small face in the corner. It suddenly lit up when the child saw them, then suddenly vanished, the curtain falling back into place.

Just as she was about to dismiss the sight from her thoughts, the door to the house cracked open slightly, an older face peeking outside. "Ivan? Good gods, it *is* you!"

Mia glanced over at the boy as he smiled at the woman. "Hello, Martha. Is everyone alright?"

The woman nodded and immediately stepped back, opening the door and gesturing them inside. "Yes, yes, come in, quickly."

The two followed her orders and stepped inside, the door shutting behind them the moment Mia had cleared its arc. She glanced around the simple house quickly, noting a pair

of bedrooms off to the side, joined by a large common room. On the other side, the gentle glow of an fire flickered from a cooking oven, some type of bread inside.

The smell hit Mia's nostrils and she turned away quickly, not wanting to torture herself so. As she did, she saw a little girl carefully climb down from a wooden chest beneath the window, touching down onto the ground unsteadily. "Iyan! Iyan!"

Ivan smiled again, crouching down as the toddler walked slowly towards him, not quite comfortable with her feet yet. "Hello, Ahri. Have you been a good girl lately?"

"Mmm!" She covered the last distance with a jump, forcing Ivan to catch her as she hugged him.

Her mother snorted. "That depends on how you define good. Who spilled the rice everywhere this morning by climbing places she shouldn't?"

The little girl put her finger to her mouth, as if in thought. "Mmm... Sky!"

Martha rolled her eyes and sighed softly. "Yes, I'm sure Sky did it, dear." She glanced back over at Ivan. "Sky is our new dog. We got him a few months ago, and Ahri's taken to blaming everything on him." Suddenly she looked over at Mia and wiped her hands on her apron. "Oh, I'm sorry, where are my manners? Please, come in dear, make yourself at home."

"Thank you," Mia said politely, then watched the woman turn her gaze on Ivan. She stared at him for a few seconds, the tension growing slightly, before Mia gently nudged him with her leg.

"Huh? Oh, sorry!" He quickly stood up, resulting in Ahri's face instantly transforming into a pout. "Martha, this is Mia, a friend of mine. Mia, this is Martha. She...was friends with my mother."

"Oh, don't be like that, Ivan," she said, waving her hands. "You and your sister are practically my family, as well. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mia. Where are you from?"

"Imil," Mia said.

Martha made no attempt to hide her surprise. "That far? Good gods, you must be melting right now."

Mia shrugged, though she could certainly feel the sweat coating her forehead. "No, it's not nearly as bad as last time. The breeze helps, as well."

The woman stopped and stared at her for a moment, then shook her head. "That's right, you were here with Ivan when he first came home. I'm sorry, Mia, dear, I didn't recognize you at first."

"That's fine," Mia said, smiling at her. "We only met very briefly. I hadn't expected you to even remember me."

Martha laughed, looking over at Ivan. "I remember every girl he's brought home."

Ivan spluttered briefly, turning pink. "What? I...I haven't-"

"I know," the woman said, frowning sternly. "That was my point."

The boy opened his mouth again, then closed it with a huff, crouching down again and turning to Ahri. Mia covered her mouth with her hand, knowing Ivan would recognize it as a

smile anyway, but trying to be polite to him. "That's not the case here, I'm afraid," Mia said after she suppressed the smile. "We're here more on...I suppose business would be the best word."

Martha glanced over her shoulder at the opposite wall, then sighed. "I thought so. Please, come sit down," she said, gesturing to the table nearby. Mia thanked her and sat down, Ivan following after a few seconds, Ahri climbing up into his lap. "She's been jabbering off and on about you and Hama," the woman said, sitting down as well and gesturing to her daughter. "She went crazy while sitting in the window, and I would have ignored her, but she just kept getting louder. And when I looked..." She shook her head. "I had a pretty good idea why you where here."

"What's been going on?" Ivan asked. "Have they done anything to you?"

"No," Martha said, drumming her fingers on the table. "A few weeks ago, Hama spread the news that they would be showing up. She told everyone that they were not to be trusted, for everyone just to keep their heads as low as possible. Then she just left."

Ivan nodded, gently pulling his hair from Ahri's grip, much to the girl's displeasure. "She showed up in Tolbi to find us, about a day after the Anemos arrived. She's fine, she's just with some of my other friends right now."

"She'd better be staying out of trouble," the woman said sternly. "We need her back, especially right now. Nothing's happened yet, but people are getting tense. Seeing that crater filled is a strange sight, and after her warning, not a welcome one. Everyone felt those surges from the lighthouse when they arrived."

"...Have you not heard about what those surges were for?" Mia asked with a grimace.

Martha shook her head. "No. We weren't sure, and not a single ship has arrived since the Anemoi to bring us news. That's not gone unnoticed, either."

Mia glanced over at Ivan, who frowned, but nodded. "Those surges...they were attacks on other cities," Mia said quietly. "Ivan was in Tolbi when a good portion of the city was ripped apart by massive lightning bolts. My entire city was put to sleep. Some cities were lucky and avoided their attacks, though."

Instead of responding immediately, Martha continued to tap on the table, glancing down at Ahri. The girl had discovered a small pocket watch Ivan kept, now amusing herself with it under his watchful eye. The smell of some sweet bread drifted back into Mia's awareness, making her mouth water with the delicious aroma.

"Well," she said suddenly. "I appreciate you telling me. I think it would be better to keep that quiet, though, at least for now."

Mia nodded. "Absolutely. The last thing we want is to cause a panic."

"We're actually trying to lay low at the moment," Ivan added. "We don't want word getting to the Anemoi that we're here."

Martha looked up at him suddenly. "Do they know you?"

The boy swallowed. "Yes. We had a run-in with one of their kings a few days ago. He never found out who we are, but I've no doubt they'll be watching for us to show up again."

"I'll make sure people pretend like nothing has changed, then," the woman said.

"Thank you." He glanced down at the girl on his lap and frowned. "And I'm sorry, Ahri, but we need to be going now."

She released his watch and looked up at him. "No! No Iyan!"

Mia giggled quietly, though she had no idea if she or Ahri had been the source of Martha's amused expression. "Come here, dear. Ivan will be back to see you again, don't worry." She stood and picked up the girl, who had now begun to whine. Mia fully expected it to turn to tears after they left, at least until she could be distracted by something. "You hear that, Ivan? You'll be back to see her," she said firmly, fixing a stern gaze upon the boy.

He nodded grimly. "I will, Martha. Don't worry. And say hello to Ben and Caleb for me, please."

With a final wave and thanks, the two returned outside. Ivan gestured down the road. "The house is just right up here."

As they approached a few minutes later, they found Alex and Jenna already waiting for them, though the discovery came as a small surprise. They had certainly detoured long enough, after all. "Find anything?" Mia asked.

Jenna shook her head. "As much gold as you'd find in a barrel of ducks. Town's empty. We barely even saw any Contigo...ans? People from Contigo," she said, shaking her head.

Ivan raised a eyebrow at her, accompanied by a small smile as he stepped past them to let everyone inside, directing them down the hallway and into the sitting room. "Contigans, Jenna. And the people are still here, just staying

inside, mostly. Apparently Hama told them to lay low for now, before she left."

Alex nodded. "A good plan. As Clotho said, they will eventually turn their eyes upon Contigo, but not until everything else has been dealt with."

"So if we don't draw attention to ourselves, we should be free to move about," Ivan said.

"Yes, though we should still be cautious," Alex said. "Travel during the day should be minimized."

"I couldn't agree more," Mia added, plucking at her collar, then turned to Ivan. "So, what about this prisoner? Any clues as to where to start?"

He glanced up at the ceiling in thought for a few moments, then shook his head. "No. He just appeared to me here, in Contigo, and then everything went black."

"Then we should start by seeing how far we can press into Anemos," Alex said. "I find it odd that not a single Anemian has come to Contigo, once part of their own city."

Mia nodded. "We can sleep now, for a bit, then go during the night to ensure we can leave in a moment's notice, if need be." She frowned slightly at herself, realizing how similar her plan was to Clotho's own, when the man invaded Lemuria, then shook it off. Simply because they opposed the man did not mean they could not mimic his tactics.

Jenna glanced over at her. "Shouldn't we go earlier? We won't be able to see much in the middle of the night."

"No," Mia said, shaking her head. "I would rather we see nothing than have someone see us."

"Agreed," Alex said. "The main thing we agreed upon before coming was caution. Kraden emphasized it rather heavily, as well, and with good reason."

"Okay, okay, night it is," Jenna said, holding up her hands defensively. "Got it." She turned her eyes upon Ivan, who noticed after a few seconds, but merely returned the gaze warily.

Mia, trying to withhold a smile again, leaned toward the boy. "I think she's waiting for you to figure out sleeping arrangements, given that this *is* your house."

"O-oh." He glanced around the sitting room, then pointed out to the main hallway that led through the center of the house. "You two can use Hama's room, the first one on the left when you enter." He turned to Alex next, frowning. "Um... I guess we can..."

Alex smiled and shook his head. "No need. I will be fine out here. I don't wish to make you uncomfortable. I appreciate the offer, however."

Mia glanced at him quickly, but found no trace of sarcasm in his face, nor his voice. Had he taken her words to heart? Perhaps.

Could it hurt to hope?

Perhaps.

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"It's a dead end," Jenna muttered, glancing around her. Ivan peered past her from the corridor, finding much of the floor around them collapsed, leaving only a small outcropping into the dark chamber.

Alex looked over his shoulder at her. "Does fallen stone stop us so easily, Jenna?" Raising his hand, Ivan felt a pulse of Psynergy race out. Ice formed to their side above the black chasm, bridging the gap between the floor segments easily. With a second pulse, the dirt covering the ground spread across the ice. Alex stepped gingerly onto it, sliding his foot slightly to test the stability, then crossed with ease.

Ivan glanced at Mia behind him, who simply shrugged, then turned back to follow Jenna across the bridge. He had no idea why the others had been so intent on investigating the sanctum. Alex had suggested it might connect to Anemos in some way, and the other two had immediately jumped on the possibility.

Not him, though he was not yet sure why. He liked to think that he found the idea ridiculous and unlikely, but a small voice in the back of his mind questioned that with a snide voice. *Is that the only reason why you're opposed? Are you sure you aren't a bit biased? A bit jealous, perhaps, that he came up with the idea instead?*

He shook his head again, focusing on his steps. The last thing he needed was to slip and fall into the darkness below. He breathed a silent sigh of relief when he stepped onto solid rock once more, just behind Jenna. The girl raised her hand above her head, the orange glow blazing brightly as it spread across the room.

The sudden scuffle of boots on stone made Ivan's head snap towards Alex, who had experienced a similar reaction an instant before, spinning around with an uncanny speed. His hand remained stretched outward, the faint signature of Mercury Psynergy lingering around him. Ivan followed his hand towards the ground, finding a dull red glow beneath the dirt.

Alex, finally suppressing what Ivan assumed to be his reflex, waved his hand. The Mercury aura shifted to a Venus one, sending the free-standing dirt and sand racing away and the red glow resolved itself into an emblem carved into the stone. An image of flames decorated the symbol, gently glowing the same hue as the edge.

"Jenna," Ivan said, a suddenly flash of inspiration coming to him, "use some Psynergy."

She glanced at him, then back at the emblem and shrugged, throwing her hands to the side. Flames leapt from them, swirling around her in spirals before finally dissolving. As Ivan expected, the emblem flared brighter, reminding him of the brands used by ranchers on their livestock.

As the glare from the flames died down, the glow on the ground responding in kind, Alex shook his head. "Jenna, stand on it."

She eyed the symbol warily. "What? Why?"

"I can feel some sort of resonance in it," he said slowly, looking at it curiously. "As if... It almost feels like an alchemy tool. It seems to only respond to Mars Psynergy, however."

"Lucky me," she muttered, but stepped gingerly onto the emblem nonetheless. After a moment she relaxed, then closed her eyes.

Psynergy did not pulse from her as when she unleashed her wrath upon the world, but it did radiate from her in a steady, silent hum, an invisible aura that Ivan could feel warming his skin. The emblem began to shine once more, feeding off the young woman's Psynergy.

Yet it did not stop at a mere glow. As Jenna concentrated, other, smaller circles around them began to light. Alex cleared the area of dirt with another wave, revealing an old, stone floor, once smooth and polished, but now worn down by years of footsteps and neglect. One by one they lit, matching the glow of the centerpiece, until Ivan found everyone tinted red in their light.

When the last one lit, he heard a very distinct 'click' from behind him. Spinning around, he watched as a small red flame lit in the darkness of the cavern, casting a small spotlight on a stone door across the chamber. As he looked on with curiosity, however, he noticed the small torch above it was merely one; he could see another to its side.

"This way," he said, led forward by half intuition, half inquisitiveness. They followed the nearby wall down the chamber, eventually reaching the other corner.

"What? What is it?" Jenna asked him, looking around.

Alex waved his hand, revealing another emblem carved into the floor. "This," he said, as it began to glow a gentle yellow, the branches of a tree shimmering on the stone. The man stepped onto the symbol and Ivan felt a rush of Venus Psynergy flow from him into the stone beneath. All at once the circles around them lit up in a single flash, a yellow flame lighting above the door.

Stepping off the emblem, Alex looked at Ivan. "You've already figured it out. Go, then."

Ivan nodded, gesturing for Mia to follow, then continued across the room. As they crossed it silently, he gazed up at the door, the pair of flames flickering overhead and casting a warm light over everything. Where did the door go? Did it truly connect to Anemos?

With a sharp burst of wind, Ivan cleared the floor to find an emblem of waves. He stepped aside, looking at Mia, who stepped onto the marking without a word. Ivan turned and headed for the remaining corner as blue light emerged around him, a quick glance over his shoulder confirming the blue flame.

When he cleared his own emblem, he found puffs of clouds waiting for him, thin wisps carried on a heavy wind. He could not stop the stray thought about how clouds were technically Mercury's domain, but quickly stifled his argumentative inner voice instead.

A sudden doubt entered his mind, like a bucket of cold water. Did they *want* to open the door? It had remained sealed for centuries, and from the looks of it, had earned itself one hell of a lock. Only two things lay behind locked doors: valuables and danger.

But was that not their intent in coming here? Had he not been the one to argue that, though full of danger, they stood to gain something highly valuable? He glanced back up, seeing the other three watching him, red, yellow, and blue light throwing their shadows in disarray. He had argued for that choice, he realized, and now had no right to simply change his mind.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped onto Jupiter's emblem and exhaled slowly, pouring his Psynergy into the disk. Purple light filled his eyes, forcing him to look back up towards the black ceiling above their heads. One by one the circles around him lit up, each making an inaudible click in his mind.

As the last began to glow, two simultaneous thoughts raced through his mind: *We did it! (What have we done?)*

The purple flame appeared above the doorway, the cool colors contrasting the warm ones and splitting the chamber into two shades. For a moment that lasted long enough for Ivan to realize he was holding his breath, the crackling of the flames was the only sound, their flickers the only movement.

At long last a grating sound drowned out the crackling as the door slid to the side, vanishing into the wall and leaving a black entrance in its wake. It made Ivan think of the gaping maw of some horrible, four-eyed creature, enticing its victims inside.

Before any of them could move, however, something in the darkness stirred.

A figure appeared in the shadowed doorway, just the barest of outlines. It made no attempt to move further, lingering on the edge of the black threshold. Try as he might, Ivan could not pick out any of the figure's details.

At once, the four flames extinguished, leaving the glowing symbols on the floor as the only source of light. Before Ivan could ask what had happened, the figure stepped out of the darkness, yellow and blue light playing off its skin.

What he had first thought to be a person seemed to be more of a demon. Though it had the body of a man, its legs and head were that of a goat. A pair of folded wings rested on its back, resembling those of a bat. In one hand a sickle hung limply as it paused outside of the doorway, turning its red eyes towards each of them in turn. When it finished, it stretched its arms and wings to the side, fully extending them. "Freedom..."

Ivan heard Mia gasp, then realized his own mouth had dropped open. Alex merely stepped towards the creature

slowly. "Who are you?"

The creature turned its head to the other man. "I am the darkness behind the stars, the blackest depths of the ocean. I have waited in my prison for eons, awaiting the day I might bring shadows forth again, rather than sit in them."

"You're not who we came for," Ivan said quietly, but the large chamber amplified his voice. "You didn't call me."

"Call you?" The creature cocked its head. "You must mean the Anemian shade."

"Who are you, then?" Ivan asked.

"Humans call me Aeshma," the creature said, its voice halfway between a melody and a hiss. Ivan found the name slightly familiar, but could not quite place it.

Evidently Alex had, judging by how the man suddenly stepped back. "Aeshma? Lord of shadows?"

"I was once called such."

Suddenly it came to Ivan. Aeshma, along with a myriad of other spirits, had been a personal fascination of his for about a month when he was younger. He had raided every bookshelf in Kalay, seeking out any stories, legends, and myths about them, his obsession only dying down when the well of information ran dry.

When he recalled the stories of Aeshma, his mouth also ran dry. "I remember reading about you. Like a plague you came in the night, cutting down whole towns, staining fields and rivers red. They said you sought endlessly for a way to kill Sol herself."

"Such nonsense," Aeshma said, the disdain evident in its voice. "I protected people from the horrors in the night, guarding them while they slept. When they denied me my sacrifices in payment, I merely ensured they experienced what I had shielded them from. They blamed me and sealed me here, and now I will deliver my wrath upon them once more."

"They're gone," Jenna called out, moving forward to stand near Alex, as Ivan had unconsciously done with Mia. "The ones responsible died a long time ago."

Aeshma snorted. "Then the world shall bear their pain instead."

"No they won't."

Ivan found himself a bit surprised at the firmness of the words, much more so when he realized that he had been the one to speak them. His heart skipped a beat as he simply opened his mouth again, continuing before the fear could catch up with him. "I won't let you go out and murder innocent people. I'll stop you here."

Those red eyes locked onto his as the fear caught up in his chest, making his vision dim and skin cold. He fought the shivers back, trying not to show any weakness, wondering if the spirit could simply sense it.

Laughter suddenly filled the chamber, beautiful and horrible in the same sound. Ivan felt as if it reached deep into his head, pulling his brain in every direction. "Come, then, child. If you would deliver light, show me your own."

For a moment Ivan feared his legs would not respond, frozen in place by his terror at the challenge he had just issued. As his hand settled around the hilt of his sword, however, his

body thawed, everything settling back into place inside him. He might still be the easily-frightened boy from Kalay, but with his blade in hand, he fell comfortably back into the role of a hero, the persona so carefully grown and cultivated on their journey.

The doubt in his mind did not quiet, but the effect it had on his body did. Ivan drew his blade as he stepped towards the spirit, each foot landing calmly and firmly in front of the other. Once the shift had been made, he no longer froze, no longer hesitated. His instincts took over, guiding Psynergy from Weyard to his opponent, his mind the conduit.

Off to the side, he saw Alex step forward as well, but Aeshma held up its empty hand. "I think not, Imilian. Your turn shall wait. Now," it said, focusing back on Ivan. "Your name, child. I would know it first."

Ivan positioned himself into the center of the chamber, standing opposite Aeshma, who had not yet left the doorway. The tip of his sword made a small, metallic ping as it settled against the stone floor. "My name is Ivan Novikov."

"Ivan Novikov..." the spirit murmured, as if testing out the name. "Ivan the Fool."

Aeshma's eyes flashed brightly and a sharp pain exploded in Ivan's chest. He instantly dropped to one knee, his free hand working into his chest as if he could push the pain out with his fingers. Everything had simply tightened up, constricting around his insides like a snake. He realized he could still breathe without issue, but the edges of his vision had begun to fade slightly, either from the pain or blood restriction.

A sharp cry from someone behind him brought his attention back to the spirit, who had dashed forward, the sickle raised and ready to cleave his head from his body. Ignoring the

crushing feeling in his chest, Ivan pushed himself back to his feet, his blade rising to meet the sickle. The instant the two pieces of steel touched, a burst of wind moved from Ivan to Aeshma, pushing the spirit off-balance and preventing it from barreling over the boy.

Ivan instantly moved backward, feeling the pain in his chest subside considerably, his sword swinging back around from the parry. As it did, purple lightning crackled along the blade, and when he brought it forward once more, the Psynergy leapt forward at Aeshma.

The spirit, however, sidestepped the bolt the moment Ivan pointed his blade, rushing at Ivan once more. The boy's blade flashed out against the flat of the sickle, parrying the razor edge away from him over and over, but Ivan constantly backpedaled, unwilling to stay in close against that weapon. He fixed his eyes firmly upon Aeshma's snout, unwilling to touch those red eyes again.

Knowing he could not simply retreat forever, Ivan began lashing out with bursts of wind, using his Psynergy to accomplish what his strength could not. The tactic worked, for a time; by forcing the spirit to make up ground with every attack, Ivan kept it from pressing him any further, giving him a few precious moments to collect himself.

I can't outfight it, he thought miserably. It*'s too strong, and just as fast.* Turning his hopes towards Psynergy, Ivan's hand snapped out, bolts of lightning streaming from his fingers. As before, however, Aeshma simply ducked and weaved between them, sliding past the strikes with ease.

And then, before Ivan could blink, he found himself held in the air, Aeshma's free hand gripping the front of his

clothing. "Your doubts are many, Ivan Novikov. I see them all."

The world spun suddenly as the spirit hurled him across the chamber, lights tumbling over and around his head as he twisted through the air, finally landing on his shoulder and bouncing once on the stone floor. Ivan grit his teeth as pain shot up his arm, then suddenly numbing as his elbow turned to ice. He pushed himself up slightly with his other hand, his eyes on Aeshma.

The spirit made no attempt to follow, simply staring at the boy. "I see you, separated from all your friends, alone as you watch them. I see you, looking at your feet as your sister looks down on you, disappointed. I see you, dying by my hand, your final thoughts those of regret...regret that you were too weak."

Ivan shivered. All those and more had never often left his mind's eye, though he refused to acknowledge them at times. How had Aeshma seen them?

He forced himself to stand once more. His right arm hung limply at his side, needles now stabbing it everywhere, while his left still grasped his sword. *And so long as it can, I've not lost. Think, Ivan! What can't it avoid?*

The answer came at once, as it so often did. "Mia, Jenna, Alex, ears!" he shouted in warning, hoping Aeshma would take longer to decipher the meaning than his friends. At the same time he lifted his blade, then swung it down to strike the stone.

Focusing the energy forwards, trying to shield the others from the majority of it, he could nearly see the air ripple as the metallic ringing bit at his ears, amplified by Psynergy.

The force of the wave of sound would take Aeshma from its feet with ease, the boy prayed.

In the same instance, however, Aeshma raised its own weapon. From the stone at its feet, a great piece of ice built itself up, forming a wall between the two. The soundwave reverberated off the chunk of ice, doing nothing more than causing it to vibrate slightly.

As Ivan looked on, momentarily surprised by the display of Psynergy, the ice suddenly exploded outwards. Enormous chunks struck him in the chest, stomach, and arms, the powerful blows picking him up and throwing him again. One piece collided with his head, sending the world spinning once more as he landed in a heap on the stone.

His vision settled again to the sight of Aeshma approaching his fallen form. His good hand groped around wildly, searching for his blade, but he could not seem to find it. The blood-red eyes locked onto his once more, the pain in his chest blossoming with new furor. *No...no... I have to win... I have to find a way...*

"I told you not to interfere, Imilian."

The pain in his chest suddenly faded. Ivan turned his head to see Alex striding past him, the man shrugging as he walked. "You merely said I had to wait my turn, but neglected to specify when that would come. I choose now. Ivan Novikov withdraws, and the Imilian enters."

What was he doing? Was... Was Alex saving him? The thought stunned Ivan, making him temporarily forget the throbbing pain in his head.

Aeshma did not even bother to glance at the boy, keeping its eyes fixed on Alex. "Oh? Will you not honor me with your

name?"

"I will not," Alex said firmly, staring back at the spirit. "I know what your kind does with names. Is that not why you gave us a false name?"

The spirit's laughter filled the chamber once more, bouncing off the rocks and attacking Ivan's mind from every direction. Alex seemed to pay it no attention. "Clever, Imilian. Keep your name, then. I need it not to see your doubts."

Alex did not wait for Aeshma to continue. Ivan felt the pulse of Psynergy wash over him like a wave as the ground itself reached up for the spirit, great stone claws that moved as smoothly as if made from sand. Aeshma leaped up into the air, bounding from stone to stone with a startling precision for one with cloven hooves.

From its vantage point, the spirit jumped at Alex, not swinging straight downward as Ivan had expected, but at an angle. Stone shifted once more, forming a great blade around Alex's lower arm. When the two collided, however, the sickle sheared through the stone with only the faintest of sounds.

Alex immediately flicked his other hand out, using the wind to push Aeshma away in a similar fashion to Ivan. Unlike him, however, the force threw the spirit a significant distance away, giving the man time to raise the cut stone and inspect it. "Interesting," he said, running a hand over the flat section of his earthen glove. "So smooth... Your blade will cut through anything, won't it?"

"That it will," Aeshma said, not making any advance on Alex. "Do you envy it?"

"No," Alex said, shaking his head as the stone fell away from his arm, dissolving into sand. "That is not among the powers I desire."

Ivan watched Aeshma's eyes narrow slightly, though Alex remained steadfast. Had it been his name that let the spirit attack him so directly, nearly incapacitating him with simply a thought? "No, I suppose not," it said. "Else, with your power, why would you hold such doubts?"

Alex's hand snapped out again, the ice that lay around Ivan and strewn about the cavern launching into the air, twisting in midair to become great icicles as they flew towards Aeshma.

The spirit laughed again, twisting as it snapped its blade out to cut down a few of the projectiles before they could touch it. Ivan felt his stomach turn cold as he watched the spirit's incredible precision, avoiding some of the icicles with not even an inch to spare. "I see them all, Imilian. You, standing out in the snow of your home, nothing but closed doors around you."

The Mercury Adept made no response, his mouth pressing into a thin line of concentration as he suddenly vanished. Ivan grit his teeth, pushing himself up on his good elbow to try and follow the battle, watching as Alex appeared slightly behind and to the side of Aeshma, raising his hands up. At his silent command, the shadows on the floor snaked out, tendrils of darkness reaching for the spirit.

But yet again, it swung the great sickle as it spun to face the man with a speed that seemed inhuman, though Ivan had to concede that possibility for obvious reasons. The shadows fell back into their great black pool, the Psynergy holding them dissipated. Aeshma lunged forward with its other

hand, reaching for Alex, but the man stepped away and vanished again.

This time, however, he did not reappear. Seconds went by in tense silence as Aeshma stood still, continuing to stare at the spot where the man had disappeared, while Ivan held his breath.

Slowly Aeshma revolved on the spot, its red eyes scanning through the chamber. "I see her in the bed, coughing miserably, while you look on, helpless."

The spirit suddenly lunged forward, its empty hand outstretched. In front of it, the cloak of shadows slid from Alex's shoulders as his hand sparked just as Aeshma's hand forced it upwards. Brilliant lightning lanced upwards to the chamber's ceiling, burning Ivan's eyes from its incandescence. For the first time he could remember, Ivan saw Alex's face overcome by sheer surprise, his mask of control falling to pieces entirely.

With a mighty heave, Aeshma spun around, hurling Alex into the chamber wall to the side. The spirit stepped slowly towards him and said, "You cannot hide your weaknesses from me, Imilian. The shadows of your doubt give you away as if you had announced every movement. Even now, I see you staring at your power, doubting your decisions, doubting the very course of your life." He stopped a few feet away from Alex, who now rested in a rather similar position to how Ivan had landed. "Rest assured, your doubts will all end soon enough."

"Oh, *I* doubt that very much."

Jenna stepped into the center of the chamber, her blade in one hand, the Warp Pearl clenched tightly in the other. Aeshma turned towards her, leaving Alex at the wall as he moved towards her. She watched the demon approach with a white fury, feeling the anger burning away inside her. She hoped it showed on her face.

She paused by Ivan, kneeling down to check on him. "You alright?" she whispered.

The boy nodded. "Fine. But, Jenna... It's too fast. It can read what you're going to do."

"Oh, don't worry," she said, grinning, then stood up and looked at Aeshma. "After all, I think I've got that part figured out," she said loudly. Behind the demon she could see Mia pulling Alex into a sitting position against the wall, checking on him.

Aeshma snorted. "So now you would seek to challenge me, as well? Must I crush you all before you will admit defeat?"

"You're welcome to try, you overgrown goat," Jenna said cheerfully, gently placing her sword against her shoulder. "You're not getting my name, though. Remind me to thank Alex for figuring that part out."

"Have I not proven I need it not?" Aeshma said. Without waiting for a response, he dashed forward, the sickle held low at his side. Jenna maintained her glare at the demon until the last possible moment, whispering mentally to the pearl in her hand. The demon stretched to comical proportions as she slipped through space around him, sliding behind him without ever moving.

As the world twisted into view once more, she watched as the demon spun around, his eyes scanning for her. They

locked back onto hers and narrowed slightly, so she mimicked the expression with a smirk. "What? Something wrong, Aeshy?"

"Your arrogance will undo you," he said, raising his empty hand. A warm sensation swept through the chamber as Jenna felt Mercury Psynergy gathering towards Aeshma. Rather than focusing it into the form of ice, as he had done previously, the demon merely continued to condense the raw energy, creating a vacuum of cold. "How do you intend to fight with no Psynergy to draw upon?"

Jenna laughed. She had not meant to, but the rage bubbling inside her at this demon forced it out, desiring to hurt the monster in any way it could make her. She began walking towards Aeshma, feeling the air continue to warm around her the closer she came to him.

Evidently realizing he had made a serious error in judgment, Aeshma pulled his hand down and thrust the pool of Mercury Psynergy at Jenna. The girl had expected this; counted on it, actually. As he pushed the energy forward, Jenna pushed her own. In a flash she had gathered the Mars Psynergy around her, automatically having filled in the void left in Mercury's, not making any effort to shape it.

Instead, she unleashed a white beam of Mars Psynergy at point-blank range into the collection of Mercury Psynergy. The utter violence of her pure elemental force not only tore through its opposite, it dragged the lingering Psynergy with it. The beam slammed into Aeshma's chest, sending the demon flying back into the wall in a manner very similar to Alex.

Steam and dust clouded around the impact point, obscuring him from her sight, but she stood ready, knowing he would

emerge. Not one to disappoint, Aeshma lunged from the wall at her, a great scorch mark in the center of his torso, surrounded by a shiny ring of skin that Jenna suspected to be frostbite. Rather than wait for him to approach fully this time, Jenna warped away in advance, ensuring she appeared off to the demon's side.

At her disappearance the demon stopped and spun, searching for her, then instantly lunged forward again. As she vanished once again, Jenna could not help but remember playing with one of her neighbor's kittens once. She had taken a piece of yarn and twitched it across the floor, the little cat continuing to pounce for it, yet falling short every time.

She giggled when she imagined Aeshma as a baby cat.

The noise only served to infuriate the demon more, yet despite repeated efforts, he could neither reach Jenna, nor could he predict where she would appear next. After countless efforts, Aeshma screeched in frustration. "Enough of this foolishness! If you will not fight me, I will move on to another!"

Aeshma spun around, nearly flying towards Ivan, who had slowly crawled further away and hoisted himself into more of a sitting position. At Aeshma's advance, he quickly pushed himself up further, pulling his good hand from support to throw a bolt of lightning at the approaching demon. As he had with the boy's previous attacks, however, Aeshma simply slid around the Psynergy, not slowing in the slightest.

"Ivan!" Jenna shouted. She really did not want to take one of those in her back. Once she had caught his eyes with hers, she focused again, appearing in front of him. With only moments to spare, yet with the calm feeling of control that

made it seem like she had forever, Jenna raised her hand and held the palm out towards Aeshma, quickly pooling Mars Psynergy in it.

Aeshma quickly moved to the side, obviously recognizing the foolishness in charging straight towards her, but Jenna merely turned slightly, following him. Precision had not been a part of her plan.

With a silent command, she ignited the gathered energy, fueling it with more energy than it could burn in the moment's notice. A wave of concussive force and fire burst from her hand, the volatile energy unable to contain itself. She shielded herself and Ivan from the explosion, directing all of it outward in an enormous half-sphere of raw fury.

The blast picked Aeshma up and tossed him away as if he were made of little more than straw and cloth, though he did not reach the wall again. This time he landed in the center of the chamber, rolling over twice before stopping.

And like Ivan and Alex, he did not rise.

Jenna clicked her tongue softly, then began to slowly approach the fallen demon. "Not too good when your special power has no use, huh? You've probably spent so long being able to see exactly what someone's gonna do that you've let yourself get complacent."

"You..." Aeshma picked his head up and glared at her, though his bright red eyes had no effect. "How is this? How do you hide your doubt?"

"Simple," Jenna said, placing her empty hand on her hip. "I don't have it."

"Impossible."

She shook her head. "Maybe to you. I don't doubt myself, or my decisions. When I do something, I stand by it fully. Anyone can second-guess themselves, but I've never seen the point. I make a choice and see it through to the end."

Aeshma's wings suddenly flared, lifting the demon up and propelling him forward. "Then see the end that this choice brings!" he screamed, raising the sickle.

Jenna responded not with words, but a roar. All around her flames burst into life, roaring with her into a great inferno. The fire moved forward, growing and expanding before the girl as the demon stopped once more, gathering his own Mercury Psynergy in an attempt to shield himself.

She had too much of a head start, however, the burning flames only serving to give her more energy to draw from, while simultaneously limiting his. Flames licked at her clothes and hair as they rushed forward, encouraging her with their gentle caresses. Even beneath the dull roar of the inferno and the sharp roar of her own voice, she could hear the soft crackling and popping of the fire as it slipped past.

The flames spilled onto the tiles at Jenna's feet, building up higher and higher as it spread out, the girl feeding them with just as much imagination as Psynergy. With another rise in pitch, the roar shifted as the flames suddenly stretched out to the sides, burning away in the shape of a great pair of wings. From the massive conflagration stretched a massive head, two bright points of blue flames nestled in the center as eyes.

Jenna's voice gave out as she closed her eyes, reaching out to the silhouette of flame. The chamber fell into an eerie silence, the quiet crackling the only thing left to hear. Even

quieter was the single word Jenna murmured, her voice cracking from the effort. "Mom..."

The flames descended on Aeshma, the demon not even visible as a black shape in the midst of the inferno. It continued to draw in upon itself as the flames gradually extinguished, rolling inward as if Aeshma was the drain to a great burning sea.

When at last the flames died down, the only thing remaining among the blackened stones was the demon's sickle, gleaming brightly in the firelight.

Her legs wobbled slightly, but before her knees could give out entirely, Jenna gently lowered herself to them, dropping her sword at her side and leaning on her hands for support. Her breaths came heavy, pushing through her raw throat like hot lumps. She could feel the drops of sweat beading on her forehead, her adrenaline not giving them enough time during the fight itself to form.

She heard footsteps shuffling along the stone behind her. Ivan, she realized. He knelt beside her on one arm, the other evidently injured. The side of his head was red, his hair matted down with wet blood, though he did not seem to notice it. "You alright?" he asked.

Jenna could not help but laugh, despite the pain in her throat. "I'm fine. You might want to get Mia to take a look at that, though."

At the boy's look of confusion, Jenna leaned back into a kneeling position and gestured to her own head. Ivan's hand slowly moved up to touch his hair, pulling back a pair of red fingers. Though she saw his eyes widen slightly, he spoke calmly. "Isaac told me cuts on the head always look worse than they are. It doesn't really even hurt much."

Shrugging, Jenna said, "Still, should probably be cleaned."

"Yes, and I'm all for getting out of here," Mia said dryly, supporting a limping Alex towards them. "I think we've investigated enough for tonight."

"You would leave without finishing the task you came here for?"

At the sound of an unfamiliar voice, Jenna pushed herself back to her feet, though remaining crouched. Her eyes quickly swung around the chamber, settling on the open door opposite them. Instead of Aeshma, an armored man now stood there, his armor the black of night.

No, she realized, not a man. A man would have a *head*, but none protruded from the armor. The steel covered every inch of his body save that, though with a chill, Jenna wondered if he even had one.

Ivan, also returning to his feet, held out a hand to stop her, though she had made no attempt to attack yet. "Wait... You. You called me here."

"I did," the armored man said, his voice echoing out of the armor. *Empty, then,* Jenna thought. "Long have I been sealed within, alongside that beast."

"What were your crimes, then?" Mia asked. "Were you the counterpart, the terror of the daylight?"

"No. Aeshma and I were unrelated, save for the prison in which I helped seal him within alongside Yegolas, long ago." The man stepped out from the doorway and Jenna noticed that the shadows had only made his armor appear black; it was really a dark blue, the color of the ocean.

Ivan started. "You knew Yegolas?" he asked, at the same time Alex asked, "Who are you?"

The armored man stepped back with one foot, bowing as much as his armor would allow. "I am Dullahan Lycoris, once known as the Fulminous King."

This time it was Jenna who started in surprise, feeling her muscles tense up as the hair on the back of her neck rose. "Lycoris? You're related to Clotho!"

The man stood once more, his joints moving silently. "Yes. Clotho was- *is* my son."

Jenna's hand snapped out, grabbing her sword before she stood up fully, pointing it at Dullahan. "Alex! Do you think we can shut that door again?"

"Jenna, *wait!*" Ivan said, pushing her blade down. When she turned to him, she saw the same look that Felix often gave her on the boy's face, before he turned back to Dullahan. "You told me you wanted to right your wrongs. What wrongs would those be?"

A small rush of air came from the suit of armor, which Jenna took to be a sigh. She fixed her eyes on the man without a body, her grip tight on her lowered sword. "Those wrongs start with my son, but they are deep-rooted in Anemos."

Ivan gave her another glance, as if to say 'I told you so,' then faced ahead again. "Could you explain more, please?"

"Once, I fought in the great wars that ravaged Weyard," Dullahan began. "Atrocities were committed by all, myself included, and for that I make no excuse. After some time, however, I grew weary of the fighting. I sought peace, but before I could achieve it, I was executed for treason."

"For trying to make peace?" Jenna said incredulously.

"Yes. The other kings did not approve of my plans, and considered them an act of sabotage against the imperial right of Anemos. I did not pass on, though; I remained trapped here, knowing I had brought terrible harm to the world, and worse yet, had raised my son to do the same."

He paused for a moment, then continued. "I have seen the things he has done, and they shame me greatly. I know I cannot rest easy until my legacy no longer continues to bleed freely."

"You want us to stop Clotho," Ivan said quietly.

"I do," Dullahan said. "By whatever means necessary, though I imagine death will prove to be the only solution to that problem."

Jenna felt her insides twist and turn cold as she looked at the armored man. Fighting down a wave of nausea, she said, "You want us to kill your own son? What is *wrong* with you?"

The armor shifted slightly and Jenna imagined he had turned to her, though the lack of a head made reading expressions rather impossible. "I know the terrible sin of which I commit by asking this, but the sin I made in loosing him upon Weyard was far graver. I would damn myself to hell a thousand times over to correct that mistake, if that was what it took."

Opening her mouth to tell him to forget it, though in much harsher words, Jenna suddenly paused. Had that not been their intent all along? She had not been so foolish to think that they could defeat the Anemoi without killing Clotho, even if she herself would not carry out the task. Despite her

incredibly powerful urge to ignore Dullahan's request, she knew it would never be possible.

She closed her mouth, though the expression of disgust on her face remained.

"We're already trying to stop him," Ivan said. "We actually came here hoping you could help us."

"I cannot," Dullahan said. "I have spent too long in my tomb that I fear I can no longer travel beyond it. Not without passing on, at least, and I would wait until I know my son is gone first. However..."

The armored man fell silent for a few seconds, then reached down and drew his great blade from the sheath at his side. He held it up to where his head would be for a moment, then placed it back inside. Stepping forward, he pulled the entire sword from his belt, holding it out to Ivan and Jenna. "I know not how much use it may be, but take my sword. Lightning answers to its summons, no matter the wielder."

Ivan held out his good arm, taking hold of the hilt with his hand, while Jenna reached out to support the sheath with both of hers. Dullahan's mailed hands released it gently as the man stepped back. "I pray it sees better use in your hands than it did in mine."

"Thank you," Ivan breathed, looking over the intricate detail carved into the sheath. A storm itself had been decorated upon the case, with an image of Thor casting thunderbolts down upon the ground, heralded by storm clouds.

When Jenna looked up again, Dullahan had retreated to the black doorway once more. "Once my son has been dealt with, I will wait here until you have halted the Anemoi war tide before passing on. If at any point you need my

assistance, ask for it, and I shall come. Be warned, however, that such an act will force my hand and send me on. I can only help once."

Ivan shifted the sword around and bowed to the former king. "We appreciate everything you can do for us."

Dullahan paused in his slow departure, his attention seemingly fixed on Ivan. Jenna felt the boy tense up slightly next to her, obviously feeling the same, but Dullahan merely chuckled. "Your eyes... I like them. My best wishes to you and your fellow serpents, child."

He stepped backwards, vanishing into the darkness, and silence settled into the chamber. At least until Jenna found her voice, turning towards Ivan.

"What?"

Chapter 13: That Which Matters Most

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 13 – That Which Matters Most

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Gray filled the world around him, as if the eye of Jupiter had cast its gaze upon everything. Clouds stretched across the sky, blotting out the sun entirely and laying down a thin sheet of drizzling rain. Noise seemed almost as frightened as color, nothing audible over the light patter of the falling water. Somewhere nearby, a woman shouted out in despair, then fell silent.

The crude coffin lay in the center of their crude circle, already sealed shut. Ivan ran his hands over the unmarked wood, finding the grain rough. He traced the outline around one of the black eyes in the wood, smoothed over in its hasty construction.

He looked up, across the circle, meeting Mia's eyes for a brief moment. She made no attempt to hide her tears, to pretend the rain had simply wet her cheeks. The red streaks beneath her eyes gave the truth away regardless, but none of them had lies to tell there. This was a small service for the closest to the deceased, and they had requested a private moment.

What sort of bond can match that forged by a trial, Ivan wondered. Who could claim to be as close to him as they were? He had no family, nor any lifelong friends. Who could

compare to those he had traveled with, to those he had risked his life to save the world with?

Piers and Jenna stood together, baring their grief for all to see plainly. Neither dealt with death well, Ivan realized; Piers had seen too little of it, Jenna too much. Isaac stood to their side, alone, hands balled into fists at his side as he stared down at the ground.

Sheba's sobbing had finally softened to sniffles beside Ivan, though the girl's trembling body continued to shake. He reached out and placed an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close and touched the side of his head to hers.

The only two not actively crying stood together. Both the fury and anguish had cleared from Garet's face, leaving him with a uncharacteristically calm look on his face. The expression unnerved Ivan greatly, terrifying him with its potential implications.

Beside him, Felix stepped forward and the sounds of grief fell silent. The rain continued its soft drone all around them, replacing the ringing in their ears that would have filled the hush around them else. He moved slowly towards the coffin, reaching out and laying his hands atop the wood gently, his face eternally masked.

"Thank you for everything, Kraden."

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"Look, I'm telling you, my equipment can't repel Psynergy of that magnitude," the blacksmith said from his seat on the bed, shrugging helplessly. "I heard about Tolbi. Nothing's stopping that."

Garet rolled his eyes. "And I told you, Sunshine, you don't need to worry about that. Just make it into armor, it'll take care of the rest. No special modifications required."

The man glanced back at the misshapen green and black lump of metal they had dragged in. He sighed, then stood up and walked over to it, moving around it in a circle before kicking it. Apparently satisfied with the 'thump' he received, he crouched down, running his hands over the ore. "What did you do to this?" he asked, gesturing to one of the black marks.

"The previous owner was a bit...difficult to negotiate with," Felix said.

"He didn't want to play nice, so I threw him in lava," Garet added, enjoying the look of surprise and horror that overcame Sunshine's face.

Felix rolled his eyes. "It was a hostile spirit that attacked us, wearing the armor. We were able to salvage that from the pool we threw it in. Can it be worked with?"

Sunshine looked back at the metal, frowning thoughtfully. He rapped his knuckles on it in a few places, then tapped his fingers on it lightly. He continued to stare at it in silence for a few more seconds, then stood up. "It can. I'm not sure if all of it is usable, though. Who will it be fitted to?"

Garet frowned as well. "I...don't know. We haven't really talked about that."

When he glanced over at Felix, though, the man simply shrugged. "I hadn't thought there would be anything to talk about. Whoever gets the armor will need to be skilled with their weapon, since the enemy will be forced to use physical

combat." Felix then gestured at Garet. "You're the best swordsman of us all, Garet. The choice was obvious."

"I...what?" Garet said, unable to close his mouth as he stared back at the other man. "You're really letting it go to me?"

Felix smiled wryly. "I might have a lot of objections to the way you handle some things, but your blade will never be among them."

Garet swallowed. "I... Thanks."

"Aww," Sheba called out. "Garet, you look so cute when you blush."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, turning around and folding his arms across his chest. The only person in his new direction was Hama, who he saw holding back a smile in a similar manner to Mia, covering her mouth with her hand. He turned slightly again, facing into the gap between Hama and Piers. "You're obviously seeing the radiant light overflowing from my Psynergy. I simply can't contain this much power."

Isaac scoffed. "With a head that big? Impossible, nothing is too large to fit in there."

Felix shook his head, rubbing at it with his fingertips. "Sunshine. How long do you think it will be? Rough idea."

"Hard to say," the blacksmith said with a shrug, nudging the metal with his foot. "I'll need to see how hard it is to work with before I can really say. I'll need measurements from you, as well," he added, gesturing to Garet. "There's no rush, though. I guarantee it'll be a shorter job than your boat."

Garet cringed and saw Sheba do the same. Felix maintained his composure, opening his mouth in what Garet expected to be a smooth transition to a new topic, but the damage had been done.

"What are you talking about?" Piers said softly. Though his voice had dropped to an even lower volume than normal, it silenced the entire room with its weight.

Felix hesitated only a moment before responding. "It's nothing major, Piers, just a few repairs that need-"

"Where is she?"

The hesitation lasted longer this time, and it only seemed to cement Piers' suspicions further. Felix sighed, then said with resignation, "At the docks. Follow me."

The two men left in silence, though Garet expected that silence would not hold once they reached the docks. Piers maintained composure well, better than any of them, to the point that Garet could not recall ever seeing the man angry. He supposed that if anything could do it, however, the gigantic gash in the *Kailani's* hull would.

He turned back to find Sunshine examining the metal once more. "Well...do you want to take the measurements now, then?"

"Hmm?" The blacksmith looked up blankly for a second, then shook his head. "Oh! Uh, no, not right now. I want to...go test this."

"He wants to go play with it," his wife called from the hearth, where she stood replacing the random items that stood on the mantlepiece after cleaning it. "You should just leave him be for now. Come back this evening."

Hama bowed deeply to the woman, and then to Sunshine, who took no notice. "Thank you both for your time. We'll do that." She turned around and began ushering the others outside, silently convincing Sheba to stop examining the row of bottles on the table with the gentlest firm grip on her shoulder that Garet had ever seen.

Stepping back out into the afternoon sun, Garet stretched his arms behind him until he earned a sharp crack from each shoulder. Ignoring the look of disgust from Sheba, he glanced out over Yallam. Despite his vantage point from the hilltop where Sunshine lived, he saw no sign of Felix and Piers. Not surprising, he realized. Piers would not have agreed to anything less than a speed just shy of running.

"So," he said, clapping his hands together and turning to Isaac. "We've got some time, and you've got something to show us."

Isaac looked down, rubbing his boot in the dirt. "Is it really that big a deal? It's just a sword."

Garet's mouth fell open. "Just a... Isaac!" He threw his hands up in exasperation. "This sword is legendary! It was hidden beneath Mars Lighthouse, in the middle of the northern wastelands, surrounded by an enormous pool of lava!"

"Magma," Hama said simply. "Magma above ground, lava beneath it."

"Technicalities," Garet said, waving a hand. "The point remains. This sword has been lost for a thousand years, or more. You *have* to show it to me."

Sheba giggled, shaking her head. "You and your swords, Garet. You're obsessed."

"I must admit," Hama said slowly, "I am curious to see the blade as well. Piers said it defied description."

Isaac stared at her for a few moments, then nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's true. It's at the inn right now."

"Well, it's certainly not getting any closer to us," Garet said, mimicking Hama's previous ushering motions. "Let's go!"

When they reached the inn, Garet threw open the door without stopping and nearly bowled over the innkeeper's wife in the process. The woman hopped back as Garet stumbled, trying to stop, but failing.

"Er, sorry Dorothy," Garet muttered, looking down. "Was in a bit of a rush."

"I can see that," the woman said, placing her hand on her chest. "You almost rushed me right into my grave."

"We'll keep him a bit more restrained," Hama said as she walked inside, placing a hand firmly on Garet's shoulder.

Dorothy turned to Hama and shook her head. "Boys will be boys, I suppose. We're starting dinner now, so it should be ready in about an hour. Six of you, right?"

Hama nodded. "I appreciate the rooms on such short notice."

The woman waved it off as she began walking towards the kitchen. "Not like anyone really ever stays here. It's nice to have some new company."

Garet looked at Hama, then to the door to their room, then back to Hama. "Um..."

Her hand lifted from his shoulder. "Yes, Garet, we can go now. *Slowly*."

"Yes, ma'am." He forced himself to walk over and open the door, stepping inside and letting everyone else in before shutting it behind them.

Isaac knelt down beside his bed, dragging a cloth-wrapped object out that almost would not fit beneath it. He glanced back up and said, "There was no sheath, and I haven't had the time to get one made yet, so I don't really have a way to carry it."

"I can rig up some sort of back harness," Garet said distractedly, his eyes fixed on the light brown wrapping. "Go on, open it."

Smiling, Isaac reached out tantalizingly slowly and peeled back the cloth, revealing the glittering steel beneath. Garet's jaw dropped first at the immense size of the blade itself – it had to be over five feet. Along the hand-guard, the blade ran nearly a foot wide, thinning out as it moved up to the dangerously sharp point at the end. The hilt itself seemed to be wrought in gold, with an enormous gem set into the center of the hand-guard. It glittered and sparkled white in the center, fading to yellow at the edges, reminding him of the sun.

The blade had a yellow sheen to it, yet not the gentle glow that concentrated Venus Psynergy tended to take. The sword itself seemed to have been glossed in the same golden color that comprised the hilt, making the weapon appear more like a decoration than a blade of legend. Yet Garet could not deny the edge its worth; even after all these years, it still looked as if it could shear through him with ease.

Garet's mouth closed and opened again several times, but he could not find the words to adequately express his amazement. Not coherently, at least. Several profanities littered the front of his mind, each seeming as useful and useless as the last.

Hama found her voice first. "Piers did not lie," she murmured softly, reaching a hand out to hover above the golden blade. "I can feel the devastating power sleeping within."

"It's so pretty," Sheba whispered, as if noise might make the sword vanish.

Much to their combined disappointment, Isaac threw the cloth back over the weapon, the glamour vanishing all at once. Garet sat back on his haunches, continuing to stare at the cloth wrapping. After a minute of silence, he looked up and asked, "Have you figured out how to use it yet?"

Isaac shook his head. "I tried feeding it some Psynergy yesterday, just to see how it responded, but nothing happened."

"It's still an amazing blade, even without any Armageddon-bringing," Garet said. "I've got no idea what metal it's made from, but it looks like it lasts forever."

Isaac shook his head. "I'd never be able to actually fight with it. It's too large for me. You probably could, though."

Garet glanced back down at the covered blade thoughtfully for a few seconds, then shook his head as well. "Nah. That just seems like a waste. I'll try and help you figure out how it works, though. Maybe it amplifies Psynergy, like your sword?"

Shrugging, Isaac said, "Not sure. If it does, I don't think I can use it, then." Reaching out, he pushed it back under the bed, letting the blanket drape over the edge like a curtain. "Well...now what?"

Garet frowned. Sunshine would not be ready for him for several hours, most likely, and even then, the armor would take several days to be forged. Likewise, the *Kailani* would need at least that time for repairs. He doubted they would be going anywhere anytime soon, so he stood up and held his hand out to Sheba. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" she asked, letting him pull her to her feet.

"Downstairs," he said. "We're the only ones staying here, and we've got a big group. Let's go see if they need help with dinner. We can get you some more practice in."

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They stood in silence on the beach for a long time, until the sun had reached the tips of the mountains to the west, threatening to cast everything in shadow within the next hour. Until the tide had pulled back out, leaving a slew of clams in its wake that waited for the waves to bring them back, one by one. Until the workers who had come to inspect the ship and make plans for repairs had gone home to their families, prepared to continue on the next day.

Only once they stood alone did Piers speak. "We...have different ideas of what constitutes something 'major,' Felix."

Felix sighed and turned to him. "Piers, I'm-"

The man cut him off with a shake of his head. "Don't apologize. I would never have expected such a formation

either, not in the middle of the ocean. I've never heard of such a thing."

"Still," he said, "I should have noticed it earlier. I wasn't paying attention."

"And I should never have allowed Virote to steal her," Piers said flatly, crossing his arms. "We all make mistakes. We'll use this to balance the debt I owe you for freeing me from Champa."

Felix glanced over at him for a moment, then smiled. "Deal," he said.

Piers turned back to the ship, staring at the terrible wound in her side. In the dim lighting, he could no longer see into the hull, to the shattered timbers and stone chamber inside. Now only blackness stared back at him from the hole, a silent, painful cry that only he could hear.

Slowly he walked forward across the sand towards the *Kailani*, ignoring the stone pillars Felix had created to hold it upright. He reached out with one hand, placing it gently on the wood, and slid it towards the gash. He lightly touched at the sharp, broken edge of the boards, pulling a small splinter from one.

"Even if you don't want me to," Felix said from behind him, "I still need to apologize. I know how much she means to you."

Piers left his hand on the hull, running his fingers along the tiny crevice between two planks. He said nothing for a minute, trying to think of how best to phrase his thoughts. He knew Felix would wait. Felix understood how to think before speaking, a rather uncommon art, Piers had found.

"My father left on an expedition from Lemuria," he said quietly, not turning around. "The last one until my own. We never heard from him again. We never knew if he had been lost at sea, or simply never made it back through the Sea of Time. They calculated how long he could live with the amount of draught and simply called him missing. But my mother and I..." he shook his head. "We knew the truth. He died, somewhere, somehow. He would never come home."

He turned around, finding Felix staring at him. No mask hid the sorrow on his face. "When I left, my mother fell ill, as you know. I tried my hardest to convince her before I left that I would not meet the same fate, that I would return to her. It took much time, but eventually, she accepted it. When the tidal wave carried me off, however, all of my words proved to be for naught. She became convinced she had lost me as well, yet instead, I lost her."

"Piers..."

"Hers was not the only weak heart in my family," he continued, ignoring Felix. "I was lucky. I inherited my father's. My mother inherited hers from her father, as well...as did my uncle."

Understanding suddenly washed over Felix's face. "No... Ensio? Is he...?"

Piers nodded. "He has fallen ill, as well. There is nothing to be done. He's not expected to see the next year."

"Then we need to finish this as quickly as possible, so that you can return to him before he passes on," Felix said firmly.

The sailor smiled and shook his head gently. "That will not happen. Hydros' emergency powers will have been returned after our departure, the Senate will ensure that. I may see

Lemuria again someday, should they lift my exile, but I will never see my uncle again."

The chirp of a gull caused both of them to look up, finding one perched on the bow of the *Kailani*. It peered down at them, chirped once more, then returned to the air. Piers watched it go, then turned back to the ship. "She is my reminder of them. She represents the family I've lost to the sea, in one way or another. But at the end of the day, she is still just a ship."

He turned back to Felix and locked eyes. "Do you understand me, Felix? She is just a ship. If need be, I can get another. I still have my memories of my family. What I do *not* want to have is just memories of you. She is the family I've lost. You are the family I've gained. All of you. If I have to trade the *Kailani* for any of your safeties, it is a sacrifice I will make without hesitation."

Felix stared back at him for a long moment, then nodded. "I understand."

Silence returned, broken by the rhythmic crashing of the waves on the sand. Somewhere in the distance, a gull cried out again, though the call went unanswered. The blue in the sky had begun to darken, while the clouds turned yellow with the onset of dusk.

"Let's head back," Piers said finally. "Perhaps Jenna and the others have returned."

"I hope so," Felix said with a light scoff as they turned and headed for the road to Yallam. "Sheba has been pining for her for the past day."

Piers glanced over at Felix curiously. "Did you console her, then?"

Felix turned to him and said flatly, "Stop that."

Shaking his head, Piers said, "You can't continue to pretend to see nothing. The signs are so terribly obvious that you have no plausible deniability."

"She doesn't realize I know," Felix said shortly.

"That's because she's a young girl in love," Piers said. "She tries so hard to keep it from you that she's convinced you *don't* know, even if everyone else does. If one were to press her, I'm sure that deep down, she would admit it's all a charade."

"I don't see the need to force the issue," he said, shaking his head. "When she is ready, she will tell me herself."

Piers paused, again wondering how to make his point. Felix could be remarkably perceptive most of the time, maintaining his mind open to all ideas. When he chose to be narrow-minded on a subject, however, he began to border on stubborn with his views. Several of those subjects were common contention points with Jenna, which always bore arguments that never failed to grate on Piers' nerves.

An argument was not what he sought here. "Describe Sheba to me."

The man glanced over at him. "What?"

"Tell me what kind of person she is," he said, kicking a stone off the path. "Tell me as if I had never met her before."

"Alright. She's... She's generally upbeat. Determined. Very kind. She- what?"

Piers stopped, shaking his head. Felix stopped as well, turning to face him fully. "I'm not asking for the description of a friend. Tune out your relationship to her, whatever it may be, and describe her with a completely neutral mind."

They began to walk again as Felix closed his eyes, slowly breathing through his nose. Piers waited patiently, knowing the difficult task he asked of the man. A friend would ignore and see past another's faults, or perhaps even turn them into positive traits, making them unable to accurately describe them without feeling guilty. To speak of someone completely neutrally, he could not see them as a friend.

And yet, to erase such emotions, the memories that bonded the two together, even temporarily, was a difficult task. Such detachment of one's mind would not be possible for most people, Piers knew, but he believed Felix could. After all, wouldn't a similar separation be necessary in order to betray his entire town?

When Felix opened his eyes, his voice had gone flat, as if reading off a soldier's report. "Sheba is an immature girl, who frequently thinks that others should do things her way. She can be unreasonable at times, especially when under emotional stress. She has a tendency to speak down to those she is not friends with, though without malice. She can be highly reckless at times, when she feels the cause is justified. She has a mischievous streak that rivals Jenna's."

Piers nodded as Felix paused, waiting.

As he expected, the man continued after a brief moment. "She also has a generous streak. She thinks little about sharing what she has with others, regardless of the quantity. She has a great willpower, though it sometimes turns into pure obstinacy. She uses it to prove herself, but she does

good things in the process. She is a loyal companion who bears no ill towards any she calls friend. She wears her emotions on her sleeve, but refuses to let others help her with them."

He fell silent. "Good," Piers whispered. He turned forward again as their footsteps crunched along the dirt path, the sound of the waves no longer reaching them. A breeze from the ocean followed in its place, dragging some fallen leaves past them and across the path, spinning them in small spirals as it went.

Several minutes passed before Felix spoke again, his tone returned to normal. "Why did you want me to say that? You know all those things as well."

"Because you needed to hear them, and you needed to know them as truth," Piers said quietly. "You need to have a clear, unbiased picture in your head of Sheba."

"Why?" he asked.

"I want you to imagine Sheba, on the path she is now, in the situation she is now," Piers continued. "I want to hear your thoughts on how this situation will resolve itself."

That familiar silence surrounded them, filled with the light tension of hard thought and pending words. When it broke, it dissolved with a gentle sigh, rather than the shatter that typically ended a calm. "She wants to tell me," he said at last. "She's tried already, several times, but can't muster up the courage. It's eating at her to be released. The longer she holds it back, the more of an emotional explosion it will be when she finally speaks it."

Piers said nothing to interrupt him, merely nodding as Felix spoke. "We're in a dangerous crisis again. The dark side of

her mind will always be there, whispering to her that every minute she says nothing, she risks losing the chance forever. It's going to push her to say something before she's ready, the longer this goes on. And if she doesn't have the courage to tell me to my face, she's going to..."

Felix paused now, then turned his face to the sky. "She'll do something stupid. Something reckless to prove her feelings, so that she doesn't have to say them. And given who we're up against, something like that could very well get her hurt...or killed."

"Yes," Piers whispered softly, barely making more than a hiss. Had the wind not died a moment before, the word would have been lost in Jupiter's breath.

Slowly, Felix nodded. "You're right. I can't let this go on, much as I'd like to. I need to stop it."

Piers glanced over at him quizzically. "Stop it? Do you think you can end her feelings so suddenly?"

"Not what I meant," Felix said, shaking his head. "I meant that I need to end this tension. Let her feelings get out into the open."

Nodding, Piers briefly debated whether or not to ask the question that came to his mind, then decided to anyway. "I might be prying a bit here, but...what are *your* feelings towards *her?"*

Felix shrugged. "The same as to the rest of you. Nothing more."

Piers raised an eyebrow. "Oh? So you'd jump off a lighthouse for me?"

"I would," he said immediately. "I've risked my life for you several times."

"I'm not talking about risking your life," Piers said, moving a bit closer to Felix. "I'm talking about having just fallen into a situation of certain death. Would you follow me to that certain death, knowing you could do nothing to prevent it?"

Much to Piers' surprise, and for the first time he could ever remember, Felix's cheeks flushed a slight pink. "I...wasn't exactly thinking straight then."

He moved closer, throwing one arm around Felix's shoulder, finding a strange enjoyment in his friend's discomfort. "You? You, the most rational-thinking person I know?"

Felix turned his face away. "I don't know what happened there. I'd just watched two of my companions die, while the girl *they* kidnapped and *I* promised to protect fell to her death. I wasn't at my most rational. I... I remember thinking that I *could* do something to save her."

"And what was that?" Piers asked.

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "By the time I realized there was nothing I could do, I had already jumped. Now, I could probably have saved us, but back then? We would have been little more than splatters."

"Poseidon's gift to you," Piers muttered. "I just want to make sure you're being honest with yourself about Sheba, as well. It wouldn't be fair to make her be honest, otherwise."

"There is love," Felix admitted. "But I don't believe it's the kind she hopes for."

Piers clapped Felix's shoulder once more. "Sometimes, all you need is love. The kind matters little."

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When they arrived back in town, Hama greeted them outside the inn and informed them that the food would be ready in a few minutes. The three stood outside together, their talk slowly turning from discussing the ship's damage and future plans to idle chatter. Felix watched the discussion shift without concern. Once Jenna and the others arrived, once their group was whole again, then would be the time to speak of plans. For now, he would simply store his ideas and bide his time.

His mind slowly drifted away from the conversation as he glanced around the town. All around them he saw the stone huts of Yallam, firelight flickering out from their windows as people retired for the night. Despite living so close to the great swamps to the west, the people of Yallam had found a long expanse of structurally sound land to build upon. It's location shielded it from earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, cyclones, and nearly every other natural disaster that plagued cities.

They truly had little to worry about. Between their modest fields and fishing game, food never became a concern for them. They had very little trade with others, something that Piers hoped to change, but they needed none to continue on with their lives. For most of those in Yallam, they would be born, grow up, live out their lives, and then die in the village. It sounded peaceful.

It sounded dreary.

Felix remembered asking Piers if he could go back and spend the rest of his life in Lemuria, never leaving the city

again. The man had admitted he could not, that the monotony would be too much. Felix knew the same would apply to him. Even had Vale not been destroyed, even had he not been estranged from its citizens, he would never have been able to stay there.

The idea of living in one place did not put him off, but rather the idea of doing nothing. Even when he had been younger, he constantly sought ways to keep himself occupied in the town. He frequented Kraden's cottage, studying from the scholar, assisting him with experiments, and accompanying him on short expeditions. His parents misinterpreted his actions and thought that he would follow in the old man's footsteps, becoming a scholar himself. In truth, Felix had no great love for studying Alchemy, though he did enjoy spending time with Kraden. Alchemy had just been a better alternative to nothing.

Even in the past year, he had been on the move, going where he could find work. Doing field work for Kraden in Tolbi had taken a few months, but after that, he turned to mercenary work, acting as a guard for trade caravans entering and departing Kalay. In true human nature, as people discovered their capacity for Psynergy, many sought ways to use it for personal gain. Several turned to the most basic, barbaric way of doing so: attacking travelers on the roads.

But as the cities began to respond to such attacks, the call for mercenaries would drop once more. He could easily get hired as a permanent guard; Kraden himself had offered multiple times. The work did not attract him, however. Guard work was best characterized by long periods of boredom punctuated with brief moments of chaos and blood. He wanted to work on something with progress, something that he could move forward with.

"Felix!"

He snapped his head back towards the inn, finding Piers standing in the doorway with a raised eyebrow. "Are you alright?" the man asked.

"Fine," he said, shaking his head. "Just thinking. Were you calling me?"

Piers nodded. "Dinner is ready."

"Sorry." He ignored Piers' amused expression as he followed him inside to the dining area, finding the others already seated around a great, round table. Ned and Dorothy sat with them as well, both speaking with Garet, who sat beside the couple.

Piers grabbed a chair from along the wall and walked to the table. He looked first at the double gap between Isaac and Sheba, glanced back at Felix pointedly, and sat down next to Isaac. Felix rolled his eyes and drew his own chair up, sitting down.

Several dishes sat in the middle of the table, the couple obviously unaccustomed to cooking for large groups and substituting quantity with variety. He could see two different fish dishes, one fried and one boiled, topped with a red powder that he expected to be some type of pepper. A pot of brown rice stood to one side, while a pot of soup stood on the other. Felix could see some diced vegetables floating in the murky brown liquid, but could not discern exactly what they were. A basket of bread rolls stood next to the pie that Dorothy quickly placed near her, noting how Garet's eyes frequently flicked towards it.

As the dishes each made their way around in a circle, Sheba passed the soup to him and smiled. "I helped make it."

"Did you?" Felix asked, taking it from her and sniffing at the fine trail of steam that rose from the pot. "It smells delicious," he said, ladling some out into a bowl.

Her smile grew wider as Ned looked over. "You were a great help with everything. Thank you. Both of you," he added, glancing at Garet.

"The only thanks a cook needs is the ability to taste his masterpiece," Garet said, eying the boiled fish as it slowly approached him.

Isaac rolled his eyes. "Before Ivan taught you anything, the most you could do was roast a piece of meat over a fire."

"And look at how much progress I've made in such a short time," he said, reaching out and taking the bread rolls, dropping one on his plate. "I'm truly a prodigy. I've found my true calling."

"My stomach gives me strength!" Isaac said in a poor imitation of Garet's voice, earning a giggle from Sheba.

Hama smiled as well, breaking off a piece of her bread. "To find something you both enjoy and excel at is a great moment in one's life. Too many spend their lives doing something they might be skilled at, but get little enjoyment from."

"Have you found yours, Hama?" Sheba asked.

"I have," the woman said, nodding. "I learned much in my earlier years, traveling around the world, and I get no greater enjoyment than from passing that knowledge on. I am meant to teach others, I believe, and I will gladly spend my life doing just that. What about you, Sheba? Have you

found anything that you could spend the rest of your life doing?"

The girl leaned back in her chair, smiling. "I'm not sure. When I was younger, I thought I would grow up, take over for Faran, and lead Lalivero. Now, though..." She shook her head. "I'm not much of a leader. I think someone else would do it better."

Garet smirked and raised his glass of water. "Good call."

Sheba's hand moved towards the bread roll, then paused, as if she had just remembered they were not eating alone. It hovered over her plate for a moment, then fell back into her lap as she settled for making a face at Garet.

Hama, never failing to appear amused at their antics, turned to Felix. "What about you? Where will you be heading, Felix?"

He placed another piece of fish in his mouth and chewed slowly, giving himself time to think about the question. Once he was ready, he swallowed and said, "I think I might return to Prox."

The answer received some level of surprise from everyone, save the innkeepers, who simply looked at each other blankly, and Piers, who merely nodded to himself. Hama's eyebrows raised, while Isaac and Garet looked up at him suddenly, their eating paused. Sheba, however, almost dropped her jaw onto the table.

"Prox?" she nearly squeaked. "Why Prox?"

"They have a lot of work to do, but will have difficulty getting it accomplished," Felix explained, then nodded his head to his left. "Piers mentioned how they're looking to

build new villages, try and repopulate the north. I can't imagine anyone else will really be willing to go do that. Besides, it's now the closest thing to a home I have."

"But it's so far away!" she protested.

"What's the big deal?" Garet asked, getting over his initial shock. "I'm sure he'll still visit. Besides, you've got Ivan to keep you busy."

Now it was Felix's turn to be surprised. "Wait, what?" He glanced over at Sheba to find her as confused as him.

Garet glanced between the two quickly. "Oh, was that not public knowledge yet? Sorry, Sheba, I saw you two in Tolbi but I didn't realize... Crap, wait, never mind."

Realization dawned on Sheba's face, along with a flush. "No! That wasn't- Garet, you idiot, we weren't..."

His mouth twisted into a frown as he looked at her. "You were in his room, inches away from his face, and he looked uncomfortable in that way that only girls make him. I gotta say, I'm a bit surprised. I always thought you had a thing for Felix."

Felix's head snapped towards Garet, hoping his glare would shut the young man up, but the damage had already been done. From beside him he heard Sheba cry, "Idiot!" The chair suddenly scraped across the floor as he turned towards her, then toppled over as the girl nearly jumped from it, dashing to the door and running outside.

The silence at the table lingered alongside a heavy tension for a few seconds, before Felix spun back around, gathering all the tension and throwing it across the table. "Garet!"

The young man visibly flinched, obviously aware of his misstep. "Dammit... I think I messed that one up, didn't I?"

"I think that might be a slight understatement," Hama said quietly, resting her forehead into her palm.

"Felix..."

He turned to Piers, their eyes meeting momentarily as he recalled their previous conversation. A simple flight from dinner could very well turn into something stupid, he realized. Leave it to Garet to force his hand in the matter.

Felix nodded, standing up. "I'll go talk to her."

By the time he got outside, however, he could not see the girl. The sky burned with streaks of flame, the sun now eclipsed entirely by the mountains. It lit the area well enough just to make things out, but as he scanned the shadows, he could see no trace of Sheba or her movements.

He doubted she would head further in town, though. She could never stand people seeing her weak, even if they were complete strangers. She had run to be alone. Felix turned to the side, dashing towards the nearby fields the children frequented, knowing as well as Sheba that they would now be empty.

The quiet murmur of conversation, dishes, and fires died out as he moved away from the inn, crossing the road that ran from the river's bend to the shore. The gentle chirping of crickets, the steady song of frogs, and the soft rustle of leaves in a breeze replaced it as his eyes adjusted to the darkness.

The path turned aside and Felix followed it, picking out the unnatural pattern of rocks laid out in the field. He still could

not believe Yallam's famed boatsman, even after all this time. To trust everything he had learned of reaching Lemuria to the town's children... Yepp had either been a genius or an idiot. He had never bothered to ask Piers which.

As he passed the first of the stones, he spotted movement beneath a great tree in the distance. He stared at it for a moment, but saw nothing, so he moved towards it. As he came around the trunk, he could see a pair of knees pulled up to a chest. Rather than clear the trunk, he walked up to it and sat down against the opposite side.

As soon as his back touched the wood, though, the clear path his mind had been following suddenly vanished. He knew he had to follow Sheba, knew he had to maintain some physical boundary between them while she recovered, but he had no idea what he needed to say to her. Words of comfort? Apology? Consolation?

Everything he could think of seemed flat and meaningless, but try as he might, he could not think of anything more appropriate. Rarely did he find himself in this situation, and he disliked it immensely. The only thing he could do was wait for her to speak, then work from there.

He laid one hand gently upon the ground, feeling her weight through the earth. It trembled slightly, yet he could hear no sounds of crying from the other side. Even now, it seemed, she still tried to hide her tears from him. Or was it *especially* now?

He leaned his head back against the tree, looking up into the sky. Above the trees to the east, he could see the first of the night's stars winking faintly back in the deepening blue sky. A stray gust of wind wrapped around the tree, making him tuck his hands into his armpits. He had forgotten how

far south they had traveled, returning to winter from the band of permanent summer at Weyard's waist, though Yallam certainly enjoyed a moderate winter.

"You should go back, Felix."

Dropping his head back down, the man peered around the trunk slightly, but could not tell if Sheba had moved. "I wanted to make sure you were alright."

"I'm fine," her voice drifted around again, steady and calm. Had he not known her, he would have believed her.

"Then let's go back together," he said, equally calmly.

The girl did not respond, nor did she make any motion to rise. Felix sat there quietly, listening closely for anything further, but nothing more came for several minutes. When it did, the steady tone of her voice wavered slightly. "Do you have to go to Prox?"

"It's never been for certain," Felix said gently. "I want to do what I can, and Prox just seems like a place that could use my help. Kraden wants my help for a project of his anyway, so I'd still be in Tolbi for a while, regardless."

Another minute of silence fell between them as the sky grew darker. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be telling you how to live your life."

"You're not," he said. "You just don't want me to leave again, and I understand that completely."

"It's not... Felix, I..." She trailed off for a moment. Felix could practically see her closing her eyes and taking a deep breath. "Felix, I... I..." Something, likely her fist, thumped against the tree's trunk. "Felix, I love you!"

The sound of frogs around them softened suddenly at her outburst, giving the proclamation a poignant silence that followed. After a few seconds, however, they resumed their high-pitched croaking, taking with it the tension.

Felix stood up, brushing the seat of his pants briefly, then walked to the far side of the tree. Sheba's eyes remained fixed on the ground as he sat down beside her, just barely peering over the tops of her knees. "I know," he said softly.

She sighed, dropping her head slightly to rest her forehead on her knees. "I'm sorry," she whispered, barely audible over the ambiance of night.

"For what?" Felix asked, glancing over at her. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

Sheba picked her head up and shook it. "I shouldn't be putting this on you. You have enough to worry about without babying a girl with a stupid crush, too."

He raised an eyebrow. "Is that all it is to you? A crush?"

"...I don't know," she admitted, hiding her face behind her knees again. "I have no idea."

"If it was, I'd be a little hurt," he said, looking up at the sky again. "After all this time, after all we've been through, and a crush is the only feeling you have?"

She looked up once more, this time actually turning towards him. "That's not... I mean, there's-"

He held up a hand to quiet her, looking over as he did. "Sheba, I love all of you. I'm happy when you're in a good mood. I'm angry when you're hurt or scared. I'm disheartened when I see you sad. I share your emotions

because I care for you, and I care what happens to you. You've all become family to me, joined by blood spilt rather than blood shared."

Sheba opened her mouth to speak, but he shook his head and continued. "I know the feeling is mutual. I've seen the same love from all of you in our battles, in our arguments, in our victories. Whatever feelings you have for me past that, I know that they are deep-rooted in the love we already share. Even if you took those away, that love would remain. To liken your affections to a simple, girlhood crush undermines everything we've done together."

He fell silent and she looked down again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"I know you didn't," he said gently. "And that's exactly why I'm here right now. You matter to me, Sheba, and I don't enjoy seeing you like this. We have other concerns, of course, but I'll never ignore yours because of that."

"Felix..." Without warning, Sheba threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck in a tight embrace as she buried her face into his shoulder. He hesitated briefly, then returned the hug, resting his cheek against the top of her head.

They lay against the tree like that for some time, the last of the red vanishing from the sky. The sheet of stars had spread across the heavens as dusk turned to night, some continuing to hide beneath the patchwork blanket of clouds. Felix gazed up at them, wondering if Fate had heard his prayers for a more exciting life, all those years ago, only to vow to make him regret them.

No, that wasn't right. While he certainly would prefer to continue on through the rest of his life without the weight of

the world on his shoulders, he would not take back his wishes. After all, was his life not the sum of every calamity that had befallen him? Without them, he would not be sitting against this tree right now, trying his best to calm and comfort Sheba.

He smiled, thinking of how much a spit in the face it must be to Fate. The Anemoi threatened the entire world, preparing to obliterate entire civilizations, yet here he sat in a field, far away from them, focused more on a fifteen year old girl's throes of the heart. "I don't answer to you," he whispered.

"Hmm?"

"Nothing," he said, glancing down at her, then back up at the sky. "Come on, we should get back. It's getting late."

Sheba sighed, but let him go and pushed herself off him. "I suppose. Can I hit Garet when we get back? At least once?"

He stood up, pulling the girl to her feet as well, and smiled. "I'll hold him for you." She giggled, but did not let go of his hand as he led her back around the tree. Not for the first time, he marveled at how small her hand was.

As they walked around the tree, the grip suddenly tightened sharply in the same moment Felix saw the man standing in the field with them. "So touching," the man said with a smile on his face, the fading light just enough to illuminate his green hair.

Felix instantly pushed Sheba behind him, his hand reaching for his sword. When it clasped around air, he cursed loudly; it still sat against the wall in the inn, where he had placed it while they ate.

"Surely you don't think resistance will change anything," he said, moving towards them slowly. "I may have underestimated your friends' resourcefulness last time, but I hardly think the two of you stand a chance."

"You must be Clotho," Felix said quietly, his mind whirring. Plenty of earth to work around him, and if the king moved much closer, the roots of the tree could be placed to good use, as well.

"I prefer Your Highness, Your Majesty, or if you must, King Clotho, worm," he said conversationally, continuing towards them.

Clotho carried no weapon that Felix could see, nor could he sense any metal on the man. Disappointing; either would have made for useful leverage. "I don't see any need to waste words while addressing a pigeon," he said.

The king laughed, then stopped and shook his head. "Your people have grown insolent in our absence. Let us skip these pointless slights and return to the business at hand." At the last word, he held out his own. "Come with me, Phoebe."

Felix stared at the man in confusion for a moment, but when comprehension dawned on him, it dawned with a red fury. "You will not touch Sheba!" he roared, Venus Psynergy rolling off him in waves unconsciously.

"Sheba, is it now?" Clotho asked. "Well, *Sheba,* I must insist that you come with me."

Rather than deny him with words again, Felix reached into the ground with his mind, driving the rock beneath Clotho upwards in sharp, jutting thorns. The Anemian simply jumped into the air, however, great white wings bursting from his back and keeping him aloft. Felix gaped at them for

a moment, only now remembering the comments about his wings, when Clotho suddenly swung an open hand. A great gale struck Felix in the side, sending him sprawling to the ground.

Clotho stared down at him with disdain. "This discussion does not involve you." Slowly he descended, landing in front of the jagged ground, once again holding his hand out to Sheba. "Now, Phoebe, or Sheba, whatever you call yourself, come here."

"No!" she cried, the terror in her voice pushing Felix back to his feet instantly. Raising her hands, she called the winds to her in a burst of Psynergy. They careened towards Clotho, curving as they approached and swirling around him. Dirt kicked up from the ground, obscuring the man from sight as the small twister turned dark.

"Let's go," Felix said over the howling of the cyclone, grabbing her hand and pulling. He skirted around the edge of the twister, his eyes not leaving it until they had passed by, falling into a dead sprint. They needed to get back, get to the others. Isaac had the sword, perhaps they could figure out how to use it. Even if not, between the six of them, they could likely stand a fighting chance. Did Clotho know about Chi? Perhaps. Even so, they could still use it to their advantage, he suspected.

When the wind suddenly fell silent behind them, Felix ground to a halt and let go of Sheba's hand, spinning around. Clotho held his hands out to the side, staring after them. "Sheba, go!" Felix shouted.

"I think not," Clotho said calmly. Both hands swung forward to point at them, a rush of wind immediately rolling over

them, but doing nothing more than whipping at their clothes and hair.

Felix narrowed his eyes. Why had he used such a weak gust, when he had already shown himself to be much more capable? The answer came as Jupiter Psynergy washed over them both, Felix's muscles instantly relaxing as his eyes blurred. "No," he murmured, throwing dirt into the air between them and the king. Its presence mitigated the effect of the spell, but the damage had already been done. He felt his knees weaken and fail, falling to one while holding himself up with one hand.

His vision drifted out of focus as his head grew light, but when he shook his head to clear the effects, the reprieve lasted mere moments. Behind him he heard Sheba faintly say, "Felix...don't...give up..."

He took a deep breath and looked up once more, finding Clotho standing directly in front of him. His vision held for one long second before everything faded to black.

Chapter 14: For Love, United

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 14 – For Love, United

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"Ivan, breakfast is ready!"

The boy's eyes opened and he stared at the ceiling for a moment in confusion, memories of his dreams lingering just beneath the veil of consciousness. For a few seconds, he considered lying there until his mind stumbled across their stories, but then decided that the details of a dream about birds and lightning did not matter. It was obviously nonsense.

Ivan sat up, swinging his feet over the edge of the bed and hopping off. He paused momentarily, shaking his limbs to try and cool the thin layer of sweat that had formed during the hot night, then pulled a loose, white shirt over himself, designed for Contigo's hot summers.

When he opened his door and stepped into the hallway, the thick aroma of searing meat immediately crashed over his senses, mingled with the sweet smell of freshly-baked cornbread. As the scent overpowered his mind, the young boy took off down the hall, his bare feet slapping against the cool stone.

He skidded around the corner, nearly falling over, much to his mother's amusement. "Be careful, or you won't be able to eat any," she warned with a smile.

Ivan nodded, his eyes set on the food lying on the table. Smooth, barely visible wisps of steam curled upwards from the cornbread, tracing intricate designs in the air as they rose. He jumped up into a chair, eagerly reaching forward for some, but another hand swatted his away.

"Wait for mother," Hama said, frowning at him. "It's impolite to eat without her."

Ivan sat back and folded his arms across his chest with a snort, then stuck his tongue out at his sister. Hama responded in kind, though quickly pulling it back when their mother turned around. "Don't worry, I'm ready," she said, setting down a similarly steaming plate of meat in the center of the table. "Now be careful. I just took it off the fire, so it's still very hot."

She carefully set out a piece onto Ivan's plate, then onto Hama's. Ivan leaned his face in close, took a deep breath, and blew as hard as he could over the meat, trying to cool it faster.

"Here, let me do it," Hama said, pointing her hand at the food. A small breeze suddenly formed inside the house, swirling around the table and whipping at their hair.

"No, stop!" Ivan shouted, extending his arms over his breakfast. He then looked over at his mother. "Hama won't let me blow on my own food!"

The woman merely shook her head and sighed.

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Piers glanced over at Hama. "Ready?" Once the woman had again placed her fingers against Felix's temples, closed her

eyes, and nodded, Piers took a deep breath, exhaling slowly as he concentrated.

Felix's eyes snapped open, frantically flickering about, then settled after a brief moment on Piers. "Sheba! Where is she?"

Piers shook his head, pulling his hand back from the top of his friend's head, Mercury Psynergy fading from the pair. "We have a very good guess, and we're hoping you can tell us otherwise."

He glanced around again, finding Hama seated on the opposite side of the bed, Isaac and Garet standing at its foot. "Gone," he whispered. "Clotho took her."

Hama sighed. "Then all is as we feared."

"What do you mean?" Felix asked, turning his head to her.

"We found you in the field, asleep," Piers said quietly. "Alone, surrounded by lingering traces of Jupiter Psynergy. To have put you to sleep like that...we put the rest together."

Felix finally seemed to realize he no longer lay in the field and sat up, looking around again. "Where...?" Suddenly he shook his head. "Never mind. He took her," he said again forcefully.

"We know," Hama said. "Else you would have been dead with her. You should consider yourself lucky that he was apparently more concerned with returning Anemos' lost child, or you would have been killed outright."

"You should consider yourself lucky you weren't anyway," Garet muttered. "It wouldn't have taken much."

"We need to get her back," Felix said, pushing himself up further, but Piers' hand planted itself on his chest and pushed him back. "Hey!"

"She's in no danger at the moment," Piers said, staring at him with a level gaze. "They very specifically want her alive and unharmed, so the last thing we're going to do is rush into Anemos, swinging swords."

Much to Piers' surprise, Felix's expression turned to a level of fury that bordered on murderous. "You think that I'll just sit here and do nothing?"

Garet glanced over at Isaac. "Is this what I usually sound like?"

Felix's gaze turned on the Mars Adept. "Excuse me?"

"Do you know how many tries it took to wake you up?" Garet asked the man. "Three. *With* Hama's help. You were in such a deep sleep that you probably wouldn't have woken up till next week. You think your body is going to be fine going from that to adrenaline-filled combat in a matter of minutes?"

"I don't care what my body thinks about it," Felix spat. "Nor will I be lectured on recklessness by *you."*

"Then you will be lectured on it by me," Piers said, placing a hand on Felix's shoulder gently. "Sheba is safe, for now. Safe enough for us to move cautiously. Briskly, to be sure, but not hastily. Understand the gravity of the situation, Felix. A single Anemian king was matched by King Hydros, Alex, and six of us. One king. For us to rescue Sheba, we must fight three, as well as all the Anemian forces they can muster."

Hama nodded, placing her hand atop Felix's. "We have one chance to do this. If we fail to prepare properly, we will all die, Sheba will remain their prisoner, and no one will survive to stop them."

Piers watched his friend carefully, hoping that he could control himself. Felix, under normal conditions, posed a sizable threat to his enemies; Felix while enraged became a force of nature, cruel and terrible in his destruction. That force had a time, Piers knew, but it first needed to be aimed. To unleash such violence now would not be enough to overcome the Anemoi.

"You're right," he said at last, leaning back. "What's our plan, then?"

Isaac glanced nervously at Piers, obviously having been making the same prayer as the Lemurian. "Well...we don't have one yet. We were just thinking out loud while trying to wake you up, really."

"Our first action will be to relocate to Contigo," Hama said. "Staying here is useless. The enemy knows we're here, however that may be, and the location holds no tactical use."

Garet frowned, crossing his arms. "Wouldn't they expect us to come after them, though?"

Hama nodded. "Yes, but we will not simply rush into Anemos. We can hide in Contigo for the time being and see what we can learn about their defenses. If possible, sneaking into Anemos and stealing back Sheba silently would be preferable. The last thing we want is a head-on confrontation yet."

"Strategically speaking," Felix muttered, but offered no opposition to her words.

"How could they have known we were here, though?" Isaac asked. "Hiding in Contigo is useless if they know where we are."

"They may be tracking the *Kailani,"* Piers said slowly, tapping his chin. "It left Lemuria and came here. How many ships leave Lemuria? That could also tie into the storm you encountered along the way."

Garet shook his head. "Clotho left before you guys showed up, remember? They shouldn't tie the boat to us."

Isaac rolled his eyes. "Yeah, there's plenty of winged boats around."

"But they have no reason to connect us and a winged boat," Garet said, staring at Isaac. "I mean, they might have simply been looking into it and found us, instead, but still..."

"King Hydros said they had advanced technology, didn't he?" Piers asked. "It's well within the realm of possibility that they have something allowing them to see distant locations. If so, they may well have watched the ship depart, then followed or located it."

"That may be true..." Hama shifted in her chair uncomfortably as she paused. "Or perhaps they simply dreamed of it."

It took a moment for the meaning of her words to sink in, but when they did, the cold hand of horror wrapped around Piers' heart. How could they have been so foolish? Their own forewarning, as well as their knowledge of other attacks, had been given through a Jupiter Adept's dreams. Why would

they think these kings of the Jupiter Clan did not dream of the future, as well?

He knew that the dreams were not always clear in their meaning; some showed exactly how an event would unfold, while some were so thickly wrapped in symbolism that the Adept would not recognize the meaning until the event had passed. Those skilled in reading those symbols, however, like Hama, could pick the dream to pieces, learning every detail in advance. How could they possibly fight against Anemos when, at any moment, their enemies could see exactly what they would do?

Piers shook his head. While true that they might see everything, he knew the dreams did not always happen. The simple matter was that if the Anemoi saw their movements and intercepted them, they would lose. With no means to avoid or cloud such sight, however, they could do nothing but remain alert.

"We can't focus on that," he said after a long silence. "We cannot control it. If we do everything assuming that they know our plans, we'll accomplish nothing."

"So instead we assume they'll never see us?" Isaac asked incredulously.

Hama nodded. "Yes. Where practical, work the possibility of an ambush into our plans, but otherwise, continue on as if they had no such power. This is why I've avoided bringing up their capability of dreams."

"So we head to Contigo," Felix said loudly, then paused, glancing around at each of them. "Then what?"

"We find out where she is, how to get there, what's standing between us, and come up with a new plan," Isaac said with a

shrug. "We really can't do much more than that right now, as blind as we are."

Felix nodded in silent agreement, though Piers could see the displeasure evident in his frown. The Valean opened his mouth, then shut it again, glancing over at Garet. "Have you already been fitted by Sunshine?"

Garet shook his head. "Not yet," he said.

Felix jerked his head at the door. "Go. Now. Wake him up if you have to. I don't know how long it will be until we return, and I won't hold up that armor's crafting."

"I'll go with you," Isaac said, buckling his sword belt on. "Just in case."

Piers smiled as he watched the two leave. Felix had calmed, which was good; he had once again turned his trained eyes to the big picture, scanning it for the details they had forgotten. Piers had no delusions that Felix would place defeat of the Anemoi over Sheba, of course, but he had slid into his habit of grabbing loose ends as he moved forwards, tying them together along the way.

"What about the others?" Hama asked.

"We have no idea where they are," Felix said, shaking his head. "Kraden might, but that would result in two additional stops before reaching Contigo. They'll show up here eventually. We'll leave a note with the innkeeper for them, and they can follow."

Hama nodded. "I'll go take care of that, then."

Piers watched her go, then began to make a mental checklist of things they still needed to do. Before he could

get anywhere, however, Felix's voice interrupted him. "She said it."

Glancing over at Felix, confused, Piers said, "What?"

"She told me she loves me," Felix said, his eyes fixed on the window opposite the bed. "Right before Clotho showed up."

Piers moved over and sat on the foot of the bed. He said nothing, knowing from the look on Felix's face that the man had more to say.

"He took her," Felix said simply, his hands curling into fists. "He took her. It's the only thing I can think about right now. He took her, and I failed to stop him. Every time I try and focus on something else, I hear her telling me not to give up, but that's exactly what I did."

"It is not," Piers said firmly, waiting until Felix looked up at him to continue. "Being defeated and giving up are two entirely different things. Giving up is a choice, not an action. You succumbed to the experience and power of an Adept far stronger than you, but not willingly. You chose to fight as long as you could, and our choices are far more defining than their results."

Felix shook his head. "Defining for our character, perhaps, but not for the world. Not for Sheba."

"But your actions haven't resolved yet, now have they?" Piers smiled at the Valean. "After all, you're still alive, which means you get the chance to change your results."

"I still failed her," Felix said, looking back towards the window. "She'll forgive me, because that's who she is, but I can't forgive myself."

Piers resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He was being stubborn again. "Then instead of forgiving yourself, redeem yourself. Make penance and *earn* forgiveness by saving her. You know she's waiting for you, don't you? When we arrive in Anemos, her face will break out into a massive grin, and she'll say, 'I knew you guys would come.'"

Felix snorted, a small smile coming to his face. "I think that 'It's about time' is more likely from her." He sighed and shook his head again. "Saving her is the important thing. I'll have time to feel sorry for myself once she's out of Anemos."

"That's good enough for now, I suppose," Piers said, reaching over and clapping his hand on Felix's shoulder. "Now come on, let's get our things together. It wouldn't be prudent to make the others wait on us."

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Mia quietly opened the door, stepping into the dark room silently. She set her candle on the desk beside the door, then set the small, ceramic basin on the floor. Stepping over to the bed, she reached out towards the person sleeping there, then paused.

Her hands continued moving after a moment, but they stopped just above the body. She closed her eyes, inhaling slowly, then exhaled even more slowly, clearing her mind of all thoughts. It took several cycles of breathing, but eventually, she found herself surrounded by darkness. The crackling of the candle's flame did not reach her ears, nor did the gentle wind that rolled by the window. Only the sounds of slow breathing, both hers and her patient's, spoke to her.

She focused on the breathing from the sleeper, listening to the air slowly move in and out of his lungs, seeing the

endless cycle in her mind's eye. The air moved into his lungs, filtering through and into his blood. She watched the life flow through his veins, pushing away from his chest and into his arms and hands, his legs and feet, then return. His heart pushed the blood back towards the lungs, where it gave up the used air in exchange for a fresh breath, casting it out through his nose.

Mia listened to the flow of life travel through him with ears that no longer heard, watched it with eyes that no longer saw. She moved her hands over his body, feeling the flow with her own energy, feeling the way the forces rebounded and converged and mirrored each other.

She turned her focus to his head, sensing the complex ebbs and eddies that swirled endlessly. As her hand hovered over his forehead, however, she could not make sense of the patterns that spun, their movements only serving to confuse her. Was that sudden reversal there an indication of an injury? What about that point where the energy seemed to simply spiral down?

"Mia?"

The flows vanished as the voice cut across her concentration, shattering it instantly. She sighed silently as she opened her eyes, knowing she still needed much practice. Instead of letting her frustration with her ability show, however, she smiled down at the purple eyes blearily looking up at her. "Just checking up on you. How are you feeling?"

"My head still hurts," the boy mumbled, reaching up towards the cloth on his forehead, but Mia's hand reached out and caught it gently.

"I'll take care of it," she said, setting his hand back down. "You took some good hits last night, but I think you dodged anything serious. How's your arm?"

Ivan tilted his head down slightly, lifting his right arm up and bending it a few times. "Fine. Just a little sore."

Mia reached out and gently turned his arm over, finding a dark bruise on his elbow. "I think you just struck the nerve here. It can numb your entire arm if it gets hit hard enough."

"That's good," he murmured as she set his arm down once more.

She reached up and pulled the cloth away from his head, finding the cut visible only by the thin red line of clotted blood. It had healed well so far, and should be fully healed by morning. Setting the cloth on the floor beside her, she grabbed one of the clean cloths draped over the ceramic bowl, dipping it into the warm water and wringing it out. She folded the damp cloth and laid it across Ivan's forehead, then placed her hand atop his head, her fingers threading into his thick, blond hair. She concentrated once more, though this time, she kept to the skills she knew well. Mercury Psynergy pulsed from her palm, moving through the boy's head to assist in the knitting of his cut, as well as help deal with any other injuries he might have inside.

He sighed as the Psynergy moved into him, his eyes drifting shut again. "That always feels so nice," he said. "It almost makes it worth getting hurt for."

Mia rolled her eyes. "Yes, well, you can always just ask for it instead. Let's skip the near-death experiences, please." She pulled her hand away, then bent down and laid the used cloth along the edge of the bowl, standing back up with it. "I

know you've slept a lot today, but you should try to get a little more."

"Mmm," the boy agreed, not opening his eyes. "I'll try."

Mia turned around with the bowl and stepped out the door, grabbing the candle as she went. She balanced the bowl against her hip briefly as she pulled the door shut, then returned to the sitting room.

Jenna sat on one of the floor cushions, back pressed against the wall, holding the Warp Pearl up to the light as she examined it. "It's so pretty. Are you sure you don't want it back?"

Smiling, Mia shook her head. "That's alright. I feel comfortable enough without it, and you can put it to better use, anyway."

She held out her hand, balancing the Pearl on the backs of her fingers. "I think it would be easier to hold as an accessory of some sort, like a ring."

"Might be a bit large for that," Mia said with a soft giggle, watching the large pearl roll back and forth on the girl's hand. "Maybe a hairpin, or a brooch?"

Her eyes lit up as she popped the pearl into the air, catching it as it fell. "Ooo, I like that. I need a new brooch." A frown appeared on her face as she slumped down slightly, gesturing at the table nearby. "I also need to think up some sort of sheath for that thing."

Mia followed her gaze to find Aeshma's sickle lying on the table, the candlelight dancing off its terrible edge. "Something it can't cut through, right?"

Jenna nodded. "Sort of. Something that covers the edge, but never actually comes in contact with it. I'll think of something eventually, I'm just drawing blanks right now."

A faint click reached Mia's ears, one she recognized instantly – the door's latch. As Jenna pushed herself to her feet, Mia shook her head, holding out one finger. With a wave of her hand, every candle in the room extinguished, and in the next moment, she vanished from sight entirely.

Plunged into sudden darkness, Mia wished that she had near the level of skill Hama had in Chi, not for the first time that day. Instead she called her memory of the room to bear, trying to recreate every obstacle in the dark. She moved slowly and silently, hearing the door open just as slowly, the intruder obviously moving in the same manner.

She turned the corner into the hallway, finding a figure framed against the ambient light outside, moving down towards her. The woman paused, waiting for the intruder to get closer, but the figure suddenly lunged forward, one hand wrapping around her neck. A foot found its way behind hers and the momentum carried them both to the ground, Mia gasping as the intruder pinned her instantly to the floor.

"What the hell?" she heard Jenna shout. A flare suddenly lit up the room, shattering her cloak of shadows and casting light onto the intruder's familiar face.

"What- Mia?"

The pressure instantly vanished from her throat and chest as Hama pushed herself off the woman, reaching out to help her up. "I cannot apologize enough, Mia, I didn't know it was you, I simply felt people inside, and then you were unseeable, and I should have known it wasn't the Anemoi,

and I just... Oh gods, I'm sorry." The woman backed up, placing the heel of her palm to her forehead.

Mia rubbed at her throat, the crushing pressure of Hama's grip still lingering. "It's fine," she said, her voice a bit hoarse. "I thought all the same things, really."

The candles lit simultaneously once more just as both doors in the hallway opened, Alex and Ivan each nearly flying into the hallway. They both looked around in confusion for a moment, glancing between the two women, before comprehension dawned on both. Ivan opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again.

Hama glanced behind her. "It's fine. You can come in." Much to Mia's surprise, several more heads appeared in the doorway, peering inside. "We might want to move into the sitting room," Hama said, gesturing down the hallway. "I remember this getting crowded."

Mia stepped back towards Ivan, allowing Hama to step into the sitting room and greet Jenna, who still looked wild-eyed and ready to attack someone. Once the others had entered, she and Ivan followed, glancing around at everyone. "I must say, I wasn't expecting everyone to show up here."

"Not everyone," Ivan said quietly from beside her. "Where's Sheba?"

Mia immediately detected the shift in atmosphere in the room as she looked around, now noticing the same. The tension that formed felt oppressive and stifling, making her unconsciously rub at her throat.

"Sheba was taken," Felix said flatly, his eyes fixed on the table. "Clotho came."

Her heart stopped in one moment of horror, her chest turning to ice. She reached back to steady herself on the wall as Jenna's cry startled her body into warmth once more.

"No!" she screamed, every candle in the room suddenly flaring up to almost two feet. "No!" she shouted again, her hands balling into fists as her body began to shake.

Felix moved to her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Jenna, calm down," he said gently, his words receiving no response, save the dimming of the flames to their normal heights. "She's fine. We're going to get her back. That's why we're here."

"She's in Anemos?" Alex asked, nodding after Felix's confirmation. "Then it seems our time for reconnaissance is over. When should we move?"

Mia turned to Felix, but the man shook his head. "I can't decide that. I won't make a rational choice."

"We should wait until morning," Hama said, glancing around. "Going after her now, while most of us are tired, could be disastrous. Instead, let's get a full night's sleep and go tomorrow."

Garet frowned. "As much as I don't want to wait longer...wouldn't it be better to wait until sunset, for the same reason? If we wind up fighting, we'll want our enemies as tired as possible. I don't know how the Anemoi sleep, but sunset would be late enough in their day to get them tired, but early enough to make sure they haven't slept."

Hama stared at him for a moment, then nodded slowly. "That is sound, given the minimal risk to Sheba."

"In that case," Mia said suddenly, "I'd like to go see what I can of the city tonight. We've already shifted to a night schedule anyway, so I won't be sleeping tonight."

"Me neither," Jenna said quietly.

Isaac glanced over at her, then towards Felix. "We'll need to stay up, too, to sleep during the day."

Mia stepped back to the doorway, then glanced back. "I'm going straight into the city. With the sun down, I should be able to move around unseen. If they *do* see me, I can leave."

"Mia, wait," Alex said, placing a hand on her arm. "I'll come with you."

"I think not," she said firmly, turning towards him. "You're still recovering, and you'll stay here until we all leave together."

She watched the ripple of surprise her words sent through the others, behind Alex, while the man frowned at her. "I refuse to let you enter Anemos alone."

"I agree," Ivan said, stepping forward. "If we can't go with you, then someone needs to."

Mia glanced at Piers. "Have you had any luck learning to cloak yourself?"

The sailor shook his head. "Not yet, I'm afraid. It's a subtlety that might be beyond me entirely."

"Then there's no one who *can* come with me," she said, turning back to Alex and placing her hands on her hips. "Everybody else just turns into a risk."

"That...may be a bit harsh," Hama said quietly, a small smile on her face. "I may not be able to hide myself as easily, but I can tell when others are approaching and prepare accordingly. My senses can even pierce Psynergetic barriers, as you noticed earlier."

Mia gently bit into her bottom lip, thinking about the woman's words for a moment. "You're right," she said at last. "We'll go together." She started towards the front door, then stopped and turned around again. "You two are to stay here," she said, pointing at Alex and Ivan. "Understood?"

The two stared at her for a moment, then nodded silently.

"Good. Then we'll see you in a few hours," she said with a nod, walking down the hallway and out into the night.

Hama followed her in silence for a short while as they walked through the silent town, heading east. This late, only the sound of the wind could be heard throughout the town, all of the lights snuffed for the night.

As they walked, Mia noticed Hama constantly looking around them. Not for danger; Mia knew she needed no eyes to find that. She wondered about the woman for a few minutes until she remembered that Hama had last seen her home before the Anemos landed. Even with her prophetic abilities, surely she wanted to see the town's well-being for herself.

No concern showed on her face, however. She had mastered the same infuriating self-control that Alex and Felix had, though Mia knew she never held it as tightly as those two did. Few things frustrated her more than watching that pair hide behind their masks.

"Thank you for taking care of Ivan."

Mia glanced over at the woman, surprised by her sudden comment. "It...was partially my fault he was hurt," she said, looking down. "I convinced him to do something he didn't want to."

Hama shook her head. "I don't just mean right now. I mean since you've met him."

"It's nothing," she said quickly. "I take care of everyone. It's second-nature to me, I guess."

"No, it's been more than that," the woman said firmly. "You've... You've been there for him when I couldn't. You were there to teach him, to help him, to guide him, to correct him. You did everything that I should have been there to do."

Mia touched Hama's shoulder gently. "You had other responsibilities."

"Those responsibilities never showed themselves until much later in life," Hama said with a sigh. "I knew where he had gone when he left here. I left as well, not long after, but rather than go to him, I went everywhere else. I spent the next thirteen years as if I had been an only child, never so much as stopping in to check on him. It would not have even been difficult to explain – he knew he had been adopted."

"Why did you never visit?" Mia asked.

Hama did not answer for a long moment. "I'm not entirely sure," she said at last, shaking her head slowly. "Maybe I was afraid he would blame me for our mother's death. Maybe I thought if I pretended he didn't exist, I could pretend my mother never existed either. Maybe I thought seeing him would break down the independence I'd worked so hard to build up."

"That's not unreasonable," Mia said. "When did you leave home? How old were you?"

"Twelve," Hama said, and Mia could not miss the slight venom that accompanied the number. "I was twelve."

Mia nodded. "That's exactly my point. You could hardly have been expected to think about everything rationally at that age."

"At some point I should have realized how foolish such fears were, though," the woman said, looking down. "I never did. Even when we finally met, I couldn't tell him. I rationalized it by telling myself it would have distracted him, but it wasn't why I kept it a secret."

"Why didn't you just come with us?" Mia asked, remembering the conversation well. "You could have told him then without worrying about him being distracted."

Hama shook her head. "I couldn't. By then, I knew I needed to return to Contigo to get the Wings made. We've been nothing but tools of destiny our entire life," she added bitterly.

As they passed the outer edge of town, the hill dropped off before them, revealing the moonlit plain below. In the dark distance, Mia could barely make out the outline of Anemos' walls, a few faint pinpricks of light flickering in its buildings that would barely qualify as stars.

She glanced behind them, finding the far-off beacon of Jupiter shining brightly, like a tiny, purple moon. Remembering its last use made her shiver, so she turned back to the darkness before her. Somewhere in the shadows all around them, a good distance away, she heard the harsh yip of some wild dog, followed by several return calls.

Sighing, her gaze fell back to the rocky hill beneath her feet, stepping carefully as she descended, but her mind continually drifted to the conversation. Seeing Hama like this scared her slightly. She had always seen the woman as a solid, unshakeable force of willpower, just like Felix. Both of them seemed to always be in complete control of every situation, regardless of what happened or how they felt. They never second-guessed themselves, never doubted their ability to succeed, always turning disadvantages into opportunities.

This side of Hama, however... Mia wondered how deeply it had been buried, and if anyone had seen it before. A part of her felt flattered that Hama trusted her enough to show it, but another part trembled, wishing it had remained hidden. Where they were headed, she could not allow herself to doubt Hama's ability.

Unable to stand the silence between them any more, Mia glanced over and opened her mouth, but as she did, a loose stone slipped from beneath her foot. Her sudden momentum forced her to hop down the remainder of the hill to save herself from falling, and when she landed at the bottom, she remained half-crouched for a moment, stunned that she had stayed on her feet.

Hama arrived a few seconds later, reaching out to gently touch Mia's back. "Are you alright?"

After the woman nodded, the two resumed their walk towards the distant lights, thankful to be on flat ground once more. After a few seconds, Mia said, "It's not too late, you know." When Hama glanced over at her, confused, she continued. "For Ivan. He's not sure how to act around you."

She nodded. "Even if I am his sister, I'm still a stranger to him. You're more of a sister to him than I can ever hope to be."

"That's not true," Mia said firmly, shaking her head. "You can't think like that. Ivan has opened up considerably to people, and has grown a lot as a person. If there was any point in his life that you could build a strong relationship with him, now is it."

Hama said nothing for a long moment, the crunching of stone beneath their feet giving way to the silent footfalls on grass. "I think... I think I'm afraid to," she said at last, so quietly that Mia nearly lost her words to the ever-present breeze.

Mia looked at the woman, but found her face unreadable in the dark. "Afraid? Of losing him again?"

"No, not that," Hama said. "I'm afraid that it will make him fail. That his feelings for me might jeopardize what we need to do. I don't want to be a weakness to him."

Something clicked in Mia's head, an intuition calling out to her from the dark reaches of her subconscious. "Are you sure you're not afraid of *him* being a weakness to *you?"*

"I..." Hama shook her head. "I don't know. Perhaps."

"You've been apart from him for so long," Mia said. "I think you're just as unsure how to act around him as he is around you, that you're worried getting attached to him might push you into a situation where you choose his safety over Weyard's."

Silence settled between them once more, making Mia wonder if she had overstepped her bounds. She had spoken

out of instinct, and while her instincts with people generally led to helping them, she had followed similar impulsive feelings before and only made situations worse.

Much to her relief, however, Hama spoke. "You may be right," the woman said softly. "I'm...not good at dealing with attachments. I've never been completely comfortable with them."

"It comes down to trust," Mia said in the same tone. "You need to trust in Ivan, trust that he will take care of himself. You need to trust in yourself, that you'll be able to make the right decision when faced with a hard choice. Most importantly, you need to trust that your relationship will bring more good than harm, that the bond you two share cannot be overshadowed by it breaking. For break it will," she said solemnly, looking up into the night sky. "Someday, somewhere, all bonds must break."

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"So, this thing can control lightning, right?"

Jenna hefted the longsword up with both hands, pointing it to the sky. Ivan felt her channel Psynergy into the blade, like an alchemy tool, but nothing happened. The wind continued to blow past her, showing no signs of her supposed command to its brother.

"Probably for the best," Ivan said from his seat on the roof. "A lightning strike might attract unwanted attention."

Frowning, Jenna lowered the blade. "I suppose. I just wish we knew how to use it."

Ivan opened his mouth to ask for it, preparing to jump down, but when he leaned forward, he thought better of it. He

certainly felt better, but given that he had taken a day of rest and Mia's help to recover from nothing more than a minor head injury, he decided against pushing his luck.

"May I?" Alex said from the doorway, stepping outside.

Jenna glanced up at Ivan as the man held his hand out for the sword. Ivan hesitated for a moment, then nodded slightly.

"Ever used one of these before?" Jenna asked, resting the flat of the blade on her arm as she held the hilt out to Alex.

He drew the sword back carefully, his eyes ensuring that Jenna's arms had cleared the edge first. His other hand moved around to grasp the handle, holding the blade straight up in front of him. "It's been some time. I don't believe I've swung one since sneaking one from Mia's father. He wasn't very pleased with me."

The blade swung down in a parrying arc, then back up and down to the other side. Alex then pulled the sword back and delivered a heavy, overhead swing that Ivan had seen Garet use to great effect in splitting monsters in half. Coming from Alex, however, the boy watched as the tip fell lower than the hilt, courtesy of the blade's momentum, while Alex stepped forward slightly to fix his balance. "Not your strong point, I see," he said.

Alex glanced up at him, then shook his head. "No, not particularly. I must admit, other than my boyhood fascination with swords, I've never been especially fond of them. I've found I never need more than my dagger, and even that sees only utilitarian use."

A giggle immediately came to Ivan's lips, though he fought to keep it contained, remembering Garet's expression when

the boy told him that he had no knife. Garet loudly proclaimed that everyone should have a knife, telling him how he carried no less than three knives while traveling: a long knife on his waist for combat, a hidden one in his boot for safety, and one in the front of his pack for food. When they stopped in Bilibin, he dragged Ivan around the city until they found a knife that Garet approved of.

Lightning snapping along the blade brought Ivan's attention back to Alex, watching the purple sparks flash in the darkness. "Figured it out?" he asked.

"Possibly," Alex said, examining the now-dark blade in the moonlight. "Difficult to say, given that I don't need the sword to control it." He turned the blade around, holding it out to Jenna once more. "Instead of using it like a tool, try imagining that you actually *are* a Jupiter Adept. Attempt to use Jupiter Psynergy as you would Mars."

Jenna took the sword, looking at it dubiously, then glanced up at Ivan. "Hey, how does this work? I usually just get excited and imagine things exploding, but I don't think this works the same."

Ivan frowned, thinking for a moment how to explain it in words. "Hmm... You know that feeling you get around charged things? Like when all your hair is standing on end, or on a thick rug? Focus on that, building it up. When you think it's big enough, just let everything go."

Nodding, Jenna held the sword up in a similar manner to Alex, then closed her eyes. For a long moment, Ivan could feel nothing but the gentle presence of Jupiter's beacon, carried on the wind, and he wondered who would be the best choice to try the sword later. A gentle hum reached his ears as the touch of Psynergy reached his mind, feeling the

charge growing around Jenna. Her ponytail began to lift up slightly as she concentrated and Ivan suddenly realized she had no basis for comparison of how much energy she was producing. "That's enough, let go."

The moment the words left his mouth, he also realized he had not mentioned how to direct the discharge. Kicking himself for being so foolish, he could do nothing but watch as lightning arced along the blade, before reaching out towards the simplest and closest target. Alex, however, either anticipated the inadvertent attack or simply reacted quickly enough. His hand flashed up, the lightning rebounding off towards the ground, as he had done against Clotho.

Jenna let the tip of the sword drop to the ground, looking at Alex sheepishly. "Um...whoops. Sorry, that wasn't supposed to do that."

Alex waved his hand dismissively. "I know, don't worry. I remember my first experiments with it."

The sword slid back into the sheath with a light scrape before Jenna balanced it across her shoulders. "Well, my curiosity has been satisfied. I'm going back inside. I've got a sheath to design."

Ivan watched Jenna return to the house beneath him, then turned his eyes towards Alex. The man stood still, staring off at Jupiter's distant beacon as the light stared back at him unblinkingly. Was he thinking about their night on the lighthouse, a year ago?

It had never left Ivan's mind. Not for long.

All through their journey, he had faced death. From ambushes by bandits, to stumbling across monster nests, to

their battles atop the previous two lighthouses, they had all fought for their lives, knowing that failure might end with all of their deaths. Apart from the fear that accompanied all such battles, however, he faced them with his head high, and when they had concluded, they never bothered him again.

Karst, however... He thought it had something to do with the battle's result. Every other battle he fought in had ended in his victory. Why would he fear that which he had emerged victorious from? On Jupiter Lighthouse, for the first time in his life, he had lost. He and Isaac had fallen, unable to even hold their swords, while Karst moved in to finish them both.

Ivan wished he could have said he faced his end with courage, like a man accepting his fate, but that would have been a lie. He could clearly recall the way his heart clenched in his chest, making his breathing short and shallow. The only thought that ran through his head was a constant denial, that he could not die yet, he was still a child. He tried to cry for mercy, but his voice had broken alongside his spirit. He could not even muster the strength to push himself away from his would-be killer.

He had spent the past day unconscious most of the time, sunken into the black abyss of nothingness, but at times his dreams returned. When they did, he watched in delirium as his nightmarish stalker transformed from Karst to Aeshma, red eyes staring down at him in triumph. Again he had faced certain death, utterly defeated, and been saved at the last moment by a fluke.

...But it hadn't been a fluke, had it?

Alex had stepped in the moment it became obvious that he could no longer continue. He deliberately took over the fight

before Ivan could be killed, in spite of Aeshma's intentions, using the information he had gained by watching Ivan fight the spirit.

"What is it?"

Ivan blinked, his eyes coming back into focus to find Alex staring up at him, as he had evidently been doing to the man. He quickly shook his head, biting his lip and looking away. "Nothing, sorry."

Alex watched him for another moment, then shrugged. "As you will."

As he began to walk towards the house, however, Ivan changed his mind. "Alex, wait."

The man stepped backwards, raising an eyebrow. "Yes?"

Ivan stared down at him for a moment, considering changing his mind once again. His eyes turned towards his feet as he fidgeted slightly, the silence quickly growing awkward. In the end, however, his deeply ingrained manners won out. "I... Thank you."

Alex cocked his head ever so slightly. "For...yesterday?"

"Not just then. Twice in my life when I thought I was about to die, you've saved me." He nodded his head out towards the beacon. "On Jupiter, Karst was ready to kill me. The only thing that stopped her was Felix's timely arrival. Had you fought with them, though..."

The man continued to look at him for another few seconds, then gestured towards the roof. "May I?"

Ivan nodded and watched as Alex simply jumped. He felt a wave of basic telekinetic Psynergy push downwards, against the ground, propelling him high enough into the air to simply land atop the roof. The boy found the usage curious and filed it away; he would need to try that at some point. It seemed more efficient than using wind.

"I appreciate the gratitude, but saving you was not my reason for abstaining there," Alex said, sitting down beside the boy.

"Maybe not," Ivan admitted, "but the end result was the same." He paused and glanced over at the Imilian. "And...yesterday? Was saving me not your reason then?"

This time Alex looked away, turning his gaze to the dark streets of Contigo. "It was."

"Did you do it for Mia?" Ivan asked.

"Partially," Alex admitted. "I would have done it regardless, though. I don't hate you, despite what you might think about me. I find you very emotional and impulsive, often letting your heart override the sharp intelligence I know you carry. You're stubborn and argumentative, especially against those who have wronged you in the past."

Ivan fidgeted again. As much as he would like to, he could not disagree with Alex's assessment.

"However," Alex said, then paused. "However, despite your sometimes foolish, emotional decisions, you make them out of concern for others. In matters that affect only yourself, I've watched you let others walk all over you without making a sound. When others would be affected, though, you voice a fierce opposition in their defense."

He paused again, this time for even longer. "And...our conflict began entirely from your desire to protect Mia. Regardless of what someone does, I cannot *completely* dislike him for that. Which leads us here," he said, motioning around them. "There is distrust between us, and I would like to see if we can be rid of it."

Ivan glanced over at the man, then returned his eyes to the ground. "I can't. It's not just Mia I've seen, but Isaac, too, and Piers, and even Kraden. I... I don't know what to think anymore. I..." He swallowed, unbelieving of the words that had come to his mouth. "I want to trust you. I just can't. It's not just the dreams. I mean, you won't even trust us with your reasons for everything you've done."

Alex sighed, looking down as well. "That's not a trust issue, it's a personal one. Mia knows it, now. She can vouch for the harmlessness of my actions."

"She's already vouching for your trustworthiness," Ivan said, the words coming out a bit more harshly than he intended. "I trust Mia, but I don't think she can stay unbiased in this."

"No, I suppose she wouldn't be," Alex said quietly.

The silence of the night settled around them like a thick blanket, the breeze fluttering through Ivan's hair. The incredible heat of the day had died, carried off by the wind once Sol had departed from the skies, but he would never quite call Contigo cold. He had seen temperatures plummet at night during his travels, especially along wide-open plains, but Contigo's only even became mildly uncomfortable in the middle of winter if a heavy gale came along.

Even still, he felt a shiver growing inside him, one that he could not explain. It had settled into the bottom of his

stomach, as if he had swallowed an ice cube, and now refused to melt. The effect was certainly not overpowering, simply a constant discomfort, but it bothered him all the same.

Alex's hand touched his gingerly, but when he looked over at the man, he found him staring off at Jupiter's beacon once more. "I don't trust myself to tell it in words. Enter my mind, see what I saw. Feel what I felt."

Ivan hesitated. He had not read another's mind in months, having all but sworn it off. Only after being around people who knew what he could do did he realize how terrible a breach of privacy it was, and reserved it only for situations in which it was absolutely necessary. However, Alex was now giving him permission to see his private thoughts in order to gain his trust. Could he believe what he saw in there? He knew, as did Alex, that only the top layer of thoughts could be read. Deeper ones could be masked or distracted from rather easily, so long as the person knew they were being read.

Would he really get another chance, though? Any information he gained could always be discussed with the others...or at least Mia. She knew more about the man than anyone, and he said she already knew this secret, so...

The boy took a deep breath, then closed his eyes. A light stream of Psynergy pulsed outwards towards Alex, easily guided by the touch of their hands. The black of Ivan's eyelids flickered lightly, shapes and colors appearing briefly, like the onset of a dream, before a white light engulfed them.

The light faded, though his vision still swam with white. As the world around him moved into focus, he recognized the

town of Imil, covered in its usual layer of snow. Snowflakes drifted down from the clouds lazily, glittering in the sunlight that made Imil habitable. In the distance, on such a clear day, he could see the towering lighthouse at the cape, its beacon dark.

His eyes lingered on it for a long moment before something cold and wet struck the side of his head. Spinning around as his hand flew up to wipe the snow off, he found a young girl giggling, her hands pressed together in front of her mouth. Blue pigtails poked out from the bottom of her knit cap, held in place with white ribbons, tied off into bows. Behind her, grinning widely, was another girl, slightly older, and after a moment Ivan realized he was seeing Mia as a child.

He tried to look around again, but found he could not turn his head. Confused for a moment, he suddenly realized why: he was seeing through Alex's eyes, seeing the memories exactly as Alex saw them...or at least as he remembered them.

Before he could ponder the idea any further, he heard himself say playfully, "So, you think that's funny, do you?"

The younger girl squealed and took off through the snow, Alex giving chase immediately after. She jumped onto a cleared path, getting a good lead over the boy as he trudged through knee-high snow, but as soon as he reached it, his longer legs quickly made up the distance. With high-pitched giggles from his target, he grabbed her around the chest and swung them both into the banking, twisting so that she landed atop him.

Who is she? Ivan asked Alex silently.

My sister, Marie.

The view wavered and shifted, growing completely black. Warmth surrounded Ivan and Alex's shared body, the uneven heating and crackling sounds telling him it came from a fire. His eyes slowly opened, hearing hushed voices from nearby, and found himself on one of the sanctum's pews. He shifted slightly and found a weight on his shoulder, but when he looked over, he simply saw Mia, asleep as he had been.

He gently slipped out from beside her. When he found part of his cloak trapped beneath her, he shrugged it off his shoulders and folded it back over the other girl, then looked over the lines of pews. Several adults stood near the back, crowded around one row and whispering to each other. Ivan recognized none of them *(Olaf Magnarsen)*, but as Alex walked towards them *(Lars Dahl)*, names began to appear in his mind *(Karin Jensen)*.

Before he could even cross half the sanctum, however, the woman named Karin noticed him. She whispered something quickly to the others and began to walk towards him, one hand against the pews to balance her distended stomach. "Alex, sweetie, come up here and sit with me and Mia," she said softly. As she got closer, Ivan could clearly see her cheeks glisten with the distinct path of tears.

Evidently Alex had, as well, because he ducked under her arms as the woman reached for him, then sidestepped Lars when he moved to intercept the boy. In the instant before Olaf grabbed hold of him, he saw the figure lying on the pew, her heavy coughs shaking the blue pigtail that dangled over the edge. "No!" he cried, but Olaf had already spun him around, pulling him into a tight hug. "Let me help her!"

He struggled against the man's embrace, trying to twist around to see the girl again, but Olaf held him tight,

whispering, "Shh, Alex, please. We're doing everything we can for her. Shh. Calm-"

Marie's coughs cut across the man's words with ease.

Everything around him began to swirl through colors and sounds again, this time settling into a sharp contrast of both white and black. As his vision settled, he realized he now stood outside at night, moonlight reflecting off the fresh snow.

In front of him stood a construction of wooden sticks, lined up tightly together like a wooden fence. His eyes drifted to the top of it slowly, where more sticks lay horizontally, and when he saw the small body resting atop those, he finally recognized the funeral pyre for what it was.

Ivan could not look away as someone stepped forward with a small torch, speaking to the congregation of people that had gathered. His words were inaudible, merely echoes of sound that Ivan assumed Alex had not paid any attention to, much like most of the scene; with the exception of the pyre, everything else in Alex's field of view was blurry.

Alex's gaze did not waver when the man ducked down, lighting the pyre ablaze. Even as the flames reached his sister's body, wrapping her in their flickering arms, he remained steadfast. The smoke quickly obscured Marie from sight, billowing up and into the night sky, but Alex did not move. Time folded around Ivan; though he watched until the flames died, the embers faded, and the remains were cleared, he felt it all pass in a matter of seconds.

Only when a pair of small arms wrapped themselves around his neck did he finally look away, the entire scene dissolving into a swirl of ash and smoke.

Ivan emerged from Alex's thoughts with a sharp gasp for air, as if resurfacing from a deep dive underwater. He looked around for a moment, disoriented, trying to figure out where he was. Once he had settled down, however, he turned to Alex.

The man still stared out at Jupiter, though Ivan doubted he could see the beacon at the moment. "She left the house to come see me at the sanctum," he said quietly. "She had already been sick, and we had been stuck there all day, trapped by heavy rains. None of us were willing to brave them to go home." He looked down. "None of us could help her when she arrived."

Ivan stared at the man, unable to think of anything to say. His mouth opened, only to close again. This memory had been so powerful that Alex had to share it by linking their minds. What words could he possibly use to console him?

"I told Mia that I never wanted to make the same mistake again," Alex said, his voice returning to its normal tone and volume. "That I would never again allow someone I cared about to die from my weakness."

Shaking his head, Ivan said, "But you were... You couldn't have been older than ten. There's no way you could have done anything."

"I was a healer, however inexperienced, thus I hold part of the blame for her death." Alex looked over at him briefly. "However...that was only half the reason. It is said that he who wields the Golden Sun has ultimate power over creation itself. There is no greater power in this world, and if anyone could find a way to do it, I believe I could."

"Do what?" Ivan asked hesitantly.

Alex smiled. "Restore the dead to life."

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Sheba's eyes flickered open slowly, finding her face bathed in light. As her eyes adjusted, they slowly opened further, everything around her coming into focus. She sat up and glanced around, looking at the large room she had woken up in with confusion.

All at once she remembered.

The haze in her head cleared instantly as she woke up fully, doing another sweep of the room. She could see no one inside with her, though she had no doubts someone would be standing outside her door. Her hands slid across the blanket over her and threw it aside, preparing to jump out of the massive bed, but the sight of her bare feet stopped her. She glanced at them in confusion for a moment before looking down at herself, finding a silk nightgown on her.

What was going on?

Pushing her confusion aside, she swung her legs around and stood up slowly, moving cautiously to avoid making any noise. She wiggled her toes briefly in the thick, plush carpet, then glanced around the room once more. It was definitely a bedroom, the size of which she had never seen before. Gold and green silk decorated the bed, the wardrobes, the dressers, the window curtains, the lamp stands, and the desk on the opposite wall.

Laying out atop one of the dressers was a beautiful, elaborate gown of black and green. She reached out slowly and brushed her fingers against the fabric, finding it impossibly smooth and soft. On the ground beside the

dresser rested a pair of black shoes that looked like they bordered on slippers.

Someone had left them out for her, obviously. Likely the same person who had changed her into the nightgown. She glanced around again, but saw no sign of her old clothes. Turning back to the dress, she frowned at it. She had no great love for them, only tolerating them when the situation warranted looking exceptionally nice. They also made fighting or running much more difficult. And besides...someone here *wanted* her to wear it.

She walked instead over to the wardrobe, expecting to find it completely empty. When she threw open the doors, however, she was pleasantly surprised to be greeted with an array of colorful garments inside. She glanced through them briefly before picking out a white blouse and skirt, both made of exceptional material as well.

Only once she had finished changing, the nightgown discarded on the floor behind her, did she think about shoes. Pulling open the drawer beneath the wardrobe rewarded her with a similar selection of shoes, so she pulled out a white pair that resembled the black ones that had been chosen for her.

She paused in front of the mirror once she finished, looking over herself. Despite the circumstances, she could not help but admire the nice clothes, wondering what Felix would think of them.

Felix.

The thoughts of the evening (prior? She had no idea) of her kidnapping had vanished with the onset of her survival instinct, but they suddenly returned in full. She had done it. She had told him. Wrapping her arms around herself and

closing her eyes, she tried to drown herself in the words he had spoken. A warm current encircled her chest as she remembered their conversation, settling down into her stomach with a flutter.

She opened her eyes and smiled. He might not have given her the ideal response, but his declaration of love encouraged her just the same. There was love between them already, he had said, and as she had proven, that love could certainly expand further.

Turning away from the mirror, she walked instead to the large window, peering through the glass. A great city lay sprawling out beneath her, though she saw a curved, stone wall that marked its edge trailing around from the left and running straight to her window. No doubts remained in her head as to her location, though they had been few and whimsical, at any rate.

She was in the lost city of Anemos.

She was home.

The thought both excited and terrified her, such conflicting emotions forcing her to step away from the window and its view. How long had she dreamed of coming to this very place? How many nights had she prayed to the gods that they might let her return to her real home someday? Yet now that the day had come, she found herself wishing to be anywhere but Anemos. The gods had a cruel sense of humor, she thought wryly.

The gods would not be the ones that freed her, though. If she wanted to leave, then she needed to take care of that herself. Felix would be waiting for her outside those walls, she knew. If she wanted to see him again, then she needed to go to him.

Balling her fists and setting her jaw, she walked to the door and pulled hard, expecting to find it locked, but it came open easily and suddenly. The excessive force threw her off-balance for a moment, but she recovered quickly and stepped outside into a hallway, quickly glancing left and right.

A lone woman stood beside her door, dressed in a white and green gown, far less luxurious than the one left for Sheba. She looked over at the girl and bowed deeply. "Good morning, my lady. Are you well this morning?"

Sheba stepped back, not yet loosing the Jupiter Psynergy that pooled in her mind. "Who are you?"

"I am Tisiphone, and I am at your service, my lady," she said, bowing again, though much shorter. When she rose again, she glanced over Sheba. "Was the dress I laid out not to your liking, my lady? I can select another, if you prefer."

"No," Sheba said, taking another step back. "No dresses, no nothing. Are you here to stop me?"

Tisiphone shook her head. "I am here to serve you, my lady. I was informed that when you woke, your presence was requested in an audience with Their Highnesses. I will show you to the audience chamber, my lady."

Their Highnesses. The three kings of Anemos. The ones who decided that all but their chosen people were unfit to live. She felt her hand curl in anger and she said, "Let me guess. If I don't go to them, you'll bring me to them, is that right?"

"No, my lady, I-"

"Don't lie to me!" Sheba shouted, wind swirling around her.

Tisiphone flinched back, raising a hand to shield her face. "I swear, my lady! Please! I am in your service, no other's!"

Sheba felt her rage cool, watching the woman cower before her. What grown woman feared a young girl? Could she be telling the truth? "If you are truly in my service, then show me the way out of here."

"At once, my lady," Tisiphone said immediately. The woman gestured behind Sheba, then stopped suddenly, looking over the girl's shoulder.

"That would be inadvisable."

Sheba turned around to find an armored man standing in the hallway with them, his helm under one arm. He bowed briefly to Sheba, then shook his head. "Your handmaiden might be bound to serve you, but I serve Their Highnesses, and their wish is to speak with you."

"And if I refuse?" she asked, though she had a feeling she knew the answer.

"Then I am under orders to deliver you to them by any means possible," he said, meeting her gaze. "Unharmed, of course."

Sheba stared at him for another moment, then turned back to Tisiphone. "Who is he?"

The handmaiden's eyes flickered briefly to the man in armor, then said, "He is Damon, my lady, captain of the guard in the palace."

The girl glanced back at him, finding him still staring at her neutrally. Had she really been so foolish as to think she could simply walk out of here? She would need to play by

their rules, at least for the moment, she realized. "Fine," she said. "Take me to the audience chamber."

"This way, my lady," Tisiphone said, gesturing past Damon. As the woman passed him, Sheba noticed her eyes flick up to him slightly. She said nothing, however, and continued moving, while Damon reached up and spoke softly into his hand, the words inaudible. After Sheba had passed, the man fell into step behind her silently.

They walked to the end of the hallway and turned the corner, Sheba's jaw dropping as they did. The hallway opened up into the entrance hall of the palace, a massive chamber of stone pillars. The stairs they stood atop curved down into the middle of the hall, mirrored on the opposite side. As they descended them, Sheba's eyes followed the pillars upwards to where they branched out high above, spreading out like fingers to support the ceiling.

She misplaced her foot while staring up and felt the stair suddenly slip out from beneath her. A brief squeal left her mouth as she began to fall, but Tisiphone instantly spun around, her hands catching Sheba by the shoulders. "Are you alright, my lady?"

From the opposite staircase, laughter echoed into the hall. Sheba glanced over Tisiphone's shoulder to find a young boy facing her direction, supporting himself on the railing as he doubled up in laughter. Sheba stared at him for a moment, frowning, then tugged at the edges of her blouse to straighten it. "I'm fine."

Her attendant nodded and continued down, while Sheba stopped herself from getting lost in the surroundings again. She continued to look around, however, keeping half her mind on her feet. Great tapestries hung on the walls, though

she dared not look at them for more than a moment. When they reached the bottom and turned left, towards a door at the base of the wall, Sheba glanced right. A pair of guards stood on either side of a large set of steel doors, some strange contraptions at their base.

The way out, she realized, making a mental note that she wrote onto her mental map. By the other staircase, she saw the boy had finally stopped laughing. He now just stood there, staring at her with a grin on his face. She resisted the urge to make a face at him and looked forward again, watching as the guards beside the simple wooden doors open for them.

Much to Sheba's dismay, only another staircase lay behind them. Sighing silently, she followed Tisiphone up the elaborately decorated corridor. After what felt like nearly three stories, they reached another door, flanked by another pair of guards.

This time, when the door opened, it did not fail to disappoint her.

The throne room of the Anemoi palace held three thrones, as she had expected, all next to each other and intricately designed with the appearance of three different birds. Carved into the chamber's floor, in the very center, lay a great emblem of a bird. Sheba was rather amused to note that the design perfectly matched those images of birds she had seen in Venus Lighthouse.

By far the most prominent feature of the throne room, however, was the lack of walls. Instead, the chamber opened up to the sky, apparently on the very roof of the palace. Turning around briefly, she could see all of Anemos extending behind her in a massive circle, and could even

see the barest smudge of Contigo in the distance, beyond the wall.

She turned back to the thrones and squinted slightly, the sun rising in the sky behind them. Three people sat in the thrones, and the realization destroyed her wonder in an instant.

Clotho sat in the throne on the right, staring at her with a bored expression on his face. She felt anger rise swiftly and fiercely to her throat, taking much effort to force it back down. Clotho raised an eyebrow at her reaction, but said nothing.

In the center throne beside him sat a blond man, looking every bit as regal as Hydros had. He stared at her with a neutral, unblinking expression. Beside him sat a woman, her blond hair tied into a braid, like Clotho's, and curled around into her lap where she played with it. At Sheba's entrance, she let her attention drift from her hair to the girl, staring at her curiously.

Damon stepped up beside her and said loudly, "I present the Volant Triumvirate of Anemos. His Highness Clotho Lycoris, the Luminous King, Sovereign of the Falcon." At the introduction, Clotho smiled at Sheba.

"Her Highness Atropos Urania," Damon continued, "the Cerebral King, Sovereign of the Eagle." The woman gently smiled as she lifted one hand from her lap and wiggled her fingers at Sheba in a casual wave. Sheba made no response.

"And His Highness Lachesis Moirae, the Temporal King, Sovereign of the Roc." The blond man remained still and silent, his eyes never leaving Sheba, who could keep her temper in check no longer.

"Oh, I am so *honored* to meet you all," she said, dropping into the best curtsy she could manage as she cut off Damon. "I'm so glad that you would deign to grace me with your presences. I will never forget the day that the three wise kings of Anemos chose someone so lowly as myself to meet with them. And by a personal invitation from them, no less!"

King Atropos laughed, clapping her hands. "Lowly? Oh, did you not tell her yet, Damon? Did you save the occasion for us?"

The man nodded curtly. "I did, Your Highness."

"Excellent," she said. "By all means, finish the introductions, then. Unless you had other plans, my dear king...?" she added, glancing at King Lachesis, who merely shook his head.

"As you wish, Your Highness," Damon said, bowing deeply. "To Your Majesties I present Crown Prince Phoebe Moirae, heir apparent to the Falcon Throne, returned to Anemos at long last."

Silence rang across the throne room as the words slowly sank into Sheba's mind, realizing that he was talking about her. *Her.* The first heir to one of the kings of Anemos. Moirae. Moirae.

Her eyes moved up slowly to King Lachesis, who stood up equally slowly. "My daughter, yes. Welcome home, Phoebe."

No. No. This wasn't possible. She had accepted that the Anemoi were her people, despite their atrocities, but to be the child of one of *these* monsters? The world dimmed around her as she stepped back slowly, shaking her head. Tears clouded her vision as she argued with herself, realizing why they had gone to such lengths to bring her back.

She was the daughter of a murderer, heir to the throne of a murderer. She would someday lead the city that had killed thousands already, and aimed to kill far more. She would inherit the blood of her ancestors, both in their veins and on their hands.

You are you.

The words suddenly flashed into Sheba's head, as clearly as if someone had whispered them into her ear. She blinked in confusion for a moment before the image of stairs came to her, stairs in Kraden's palace in Tolbi.

You are you, first and foremost. Your heritage doesn't matter.

Felix. Felix had told her that, when she had first learned of Anemos' return. He stood by her, knowing what she was, what her people had done, and vouched for her. He believed in her, believed that she would not follow in their footsteps.

Nor was he the only one. Ivan had claimed her to be more Laliveran than Anemian, regardless of her birth. He had answered her concerns by telling her she was strong enough to overcome whatever temptations rose before her, that she would fight to do the right thing instead.

"I am me," she whispered, then looked up. "My name is Sheba Kamari," she said clearly, her voice carrying on the wind that rolled across the rooftop. "I am the daughter of Faran and Zahara Kamari, of Lalivero, my real home. You will release me now, or you will quickly find a war beginning within your city's walls, as well."

Now Clotho appeared interested, peering down at her from his throne in amusement. "The child carries a sharp tongue.

Hear the command in her voice? A King's words, despite her upbringing."

"Well, Sheba, I certainly admire your spirit," Atropos said, her voice dropping to a low, sultry tone. "Few would stand tall while denying their royal heritage for one of a baseborn family, destined to do nothing but walk the ground till the end of their days."

"I would take that baseborn family over people like you any day," Sheba spat.

"You certainly look the part," Atropos said, gesturing at the girl, though her eyes moved to the handmaiden behind her. "Was I not clear in my request for a gown suitable for the young Prince? Is she to make her return wearing simple clothes more accustomed to the commoners than the royalty?"

"I don't take requests from you," Sheba said, crossing her arms. "Do you plan on releasing me?"

Lachesis made a broad sweeping gesture with his hand. "Of course. The entire city is yours, to travel as you see fit. This is your home, after all, whether you accept that or not."

She stared at him. "How generous of you. What happens if I try to walk out through those gates at the far side of town, then?"

"Unfortunately, we cannot allow that," he said, meeting her gaze firmly. "We have not yet finished researching the state of Weyard, so I cannot risk you coming to harm outside our walls. Once I deem it safe, such travel will be allowed, though I see no reason to."

"The reason is so I can get away from here," she said, spreading her hands to the side. "You think I can't defend myself? Come try me."

"I did," Clotho said suddenly, shifting around in the throne. "I repelled you and all your friends with ease. You might have strength among the worms born in Alchemy's void, Phoebe, but you will find none of that weakness with us."

She stared at him for a long moment, Jupiter Psynergy gathering to her hands. He was right, she knew. She had watched him and Hydros trade Psynergetic blows of such magnitude and finesse that she had spent the fight merely watching in awe at their power. She would be no match for him, never mind all three kings. They seemed to have no intention of hurting her, but provoking them with violence would go nowhere pleasant, she suspected.

Dissipating the gathered Psynergy around her, she let her hands drop to her sides. "You're right. I'll just have to wait until my friends get here. You didn't seem too eager to fight us all last time."

He smiled coldly at her. "Even lowly worms could have proven enough of a distraction to let the King of the Mists make a lucky strike. If they are foolish enough to show up, I hope they bring him, else it will be short work to crush them all."

Sheba suddenly remembered that Alex had never revealed his possession of the Golden Sun to the king. Of all of them, Alex could probably match the man in Psynergetic prowess. What he lacked in experience, he made up for in versatility, creativity, and raw power. Clotho thought Alex was just a regular Adept, though.

More than that, he thought all of them were just regular Adepts, which she supposed was not far from the truth. "If it was such short work, you would have done it at the start," Sheba said slowly. "Instead, you ran from us. What kind of bird runs?"

A flower of satisfaction bloomed in her chest when the man's expression flickered with annoyance. "One who gave the world more credit than it deserved. Rest assured, such caution has been proven unnecessary."

"I'm sure it has," she continued, looking at him with a pitying expression. "You must look pretty stupid, running away from a few ants like that. Should I address you as Sovereign of the Ostrich, or did you have-"

"Enough," Lachesis said loudly, his voice echoing across the rooftop with an unnatural volume. "I'll not sit here and listen to you bait Lycoris, Phoebe."

"My name is Sheba," she called out, but he ignored her.

"Come with me, Lycoris," he said, moving towards the stairs. "I wish to hear of your findings in Osenia."

"At once, my king," Clotho said, following the man, though not without casting one final, disdainful glance at Sheba.

She stepped aside as the kings approached, watching them move down the stairs in silence. Damon turned back to the thrones, bowed, and followed after them.

"Full of himself, isn't he?" Sheba turned back around to find King Atropos walking towards her slowly. "Clotho's so prickly sometimes, especially when it comes to people mocking him. I see we have something in common," she said, grinning at the girl.

"We have nothing in common," Sheba said, stepping back.

Atropos shook her head. "You're so afraid of being like us in any way, aren't you? You'll get over that, eventually." The woman turned and moved towards the stairs as well, but stopped at the top. "He's right, by the way. As self-absorbed as he is, he'll still tear your friends to pieces. You might want to start praying that they never show up, if you value their lives."

Sheba watched the woman vanish down the stairs in silence, thinking about her words. Alex could match Clotho, that she was sure of. With the others accompanying him, they could defeat him. Him, but not *them.* All three kings gathered here, invested in keeping her restrained to Anemos. Were Felix and the others to try and fight them...

She shook her head. Thinking like that would get her nowhere, but neither would being foolishly optimistic. A straight up fight would be out of the question, most definitely. She would need some plan for escape that did not involve one, then.

Nothing came to mind immediately, so she pushed the thought to the back of her mind, letting it stew silently. Instead, she walked past the stairs to the parapet, peering through one of the gaps to the city below. With a big jump, she grabbed the top and walked herself up it, standing atop the wall as the wind blew around her.

"My lady, please! You may fall!" Tisiphone cried, moving towards her.

Sheba simply glanced over her shoulder at the woman. "I may. I did it once before, though, didn't I?"

The handmaiden frowned, but said nothing, so Sheba turned her eyes back to the town. Unlike most of the cities she had been to, while the palace towered over everything else, it appeared to be the only defining feature of the city, save an enormous tower in the center. Every other building stood no more than two stories, each as unremarkable as the next.

She turned her eyes back to the tower, a slender construction topped with a glass chamber, white light glowing within. Recognizing the structure immediately for what it was, she asked, "What's the lighthouse for? There's no sea nearby."

"It was once used to guide our fleet, my lady," Tisiphone said quietly, standing beneath her. "When Yegelos doused Jupiter Lighthouse, we altered its purpose. Now it recycles the Psynergy of the city, acting in the place of the main lighthouses."

"So it kept Alchemy alive here in Anemos," Sheba said, nodding. That explained how the city had remained airborne for so many centuries after Alchemy's seal – it turned itself into a miniature Weyard, with one lighthouse to take the place of four. Kraden had explained to her before the theory of the lighthouses, their power used to maintain the flow of Alchemy through Weyard and her children. If the area to be maintained was smaller, a smaller lighthouse would be sufficient.

Anemos Lighthouse... To be able to replicate the technology of the great lighthouses, enough to ignore them entirely... She shivered, wondering what else the Anemoi could do. "Child of the Gods, huh? Close enough, I guess," she muttered to herself.

"Child of the Gods? I like that title."

Sheba turned around to find the boy from the stairs standing on the rooftop now, smirking at her. "Yeah? You'll have to find your own, then. That one's mine," she said, remembering his laughter.

He shrugged. "I say I have just a much a claim to it as you do, my *Prince."* The boy dipped into a bow at the last word, his eyes never leaving hers.

She stared at him for a moment, then stepped to the edge and jumped back to the rooftop. Standing up to the kings had done more than just improve her mood; it made her feel powerful, knowing that no matter how much they might want to, they could not restrain her spirit. If she would not take insults from the kings, why would she take them from this kid? "Tisiphone," she said, turning her head to the side slightly, "who is this little brat?"

Her attendant glanced at the boy nervously, then said, "My lady, this... This is..."

He laughed again, the sound digging under Sheba's skin. "Go ahead and tell her, handmaiden."

Tisiphone glanced between the two once more. "My lady, this is Prince Alastor."

Alastor rolled his eyes. "Prince Alastor Moirae, heir presumptive to the Falcon Throne, thanks to you."

Sheba nodded slowly, wondering why she felt no surprise at the sudden appearance of a brother. Had she simply been drained from the revelation of her family, that now she had no shock left to feel? "Don't worry, I won't be around long enough to keep the title of Crown Prince for long. You can have that one back."

"Oh, I plan on getting it back, one way or the other," Alastor said, flexing one of his hands idly.

Sheba raised one eyebrow, but before she could say anything, her handmaiden spoke. "I will not allow you to harm my mistress," Tisiphone said from behind her, the firmness of her words surprising the girl.

Alastor's eyes never left Sheba, a smirk slowly forming on his face. "Oh, really?" Sheba felt the pulse of Jupiter Psynergy from him, but much to her surprise, it felt weak – weaker than her own Psynergy. Not simply in magnitude, either, which could be adjusted, but in control itself. The spell behind the pulse was shoddily constructed, the sort that was more likely to be seen in an emergency.

Before lightning could even respond to the Psynergy's call, a far more potent pulse raced from behind her. Alastor's aura became faintly visible briefly, rolling through the colors of the rainbow, then faded once more. Immediately his Psynergy signature vanished, his power sealed within his own body.

Sheba glanced back at Tisiphone a bit nervously. Sealing an Adept was more easily done on a tired or distracted enemy, one who could not quickly muster the willpower to hold off the seal. While Alastor might have been distracted by his own casting, however, Sheba knew he could never have resisted the seal. Had Tisiphone turned it on her, she doubted that she could have resisted it for more than a few seconds, either.

This was the woman who flinched away when Sheba shouted at her? She had no doubts that Tisiphone could disable her physically, as well, and with as little effort. Why would she

fear Sheba, but not Alastor, despite clearly being more powerful than both?

I am at your service, my lady.

The girl nodded slowly, understanding. Tisiphone was bound to her, a handmaiden not just for service, but for protection, as well. A bodyguard, one who would protect her against *all* enemies – including, she hoped, the kings.

Not that she needed protection against this brat. Despite the situation, Sheba could not help but laugh as she turned back to him. "How old are you, Alastor? I'd put you around...maybe eleven. Am I close?"

He glanced down at his hands, clenching them and unclenching them tightly in what Sheba suspected was a test of the seal's power. Having evidently found it too durable to break, he looked back up at her, frowning. "Twelve. What does that matter?"

Sheba put one hand on her hip, using the other one to wag a finger at him. "What makes you think you're going to have any luck trying to beat me, then? I can't remember the last time some little turd was so full of himself."

Alastor flushed bright red. "I'm not losing to you, I'm losing to your little maid behind you! A shame you're too scared to walk without your babysitter!"

Shaking her head and chuckling, Sheba said, "What, you think that just because I've been on the surface for all my life, you're better at Psynergy than me?"

"I've been trained in Psynergy by my servants," he said, his hands curling into fists.

"Yeah?" she said, raising an eyebrow. "I've been trained in Psynergy by *dragons.* Not in a palace, either, but in battle. I've been around the entire world, fighting every monster you can imagine and plenty that you can't. I'd swat you like a fly."

Rather than growing angrier, as Sheba expected, or denying it, the boy smiled, calming down. "You're right, that would be a stupid idea. Why should I attack you in your own area?" He stepped back slowly, keeping his eyes on Sheba. "Keep your pet close. You might need her." He turned around the corner that housed the stairwell and vanished.

Only after he had left did she allow the guards around her emotions to drop. "Tisiphone," she said quietly, "is that...*thing* really my brother?"

"He is, my lady," she said, equally quietly. "I fear-" She stopped suddenly, shaking her head. "I apologize, my lady, I forget myself."

"No," Sheba said quickly. "Please, tell me."

Tisiphone glanced at her uneasily, then looked down. "I fear that your father has...not paid Alastor the attention he needs. He has grown a little...unstable."

Sheba snorted. "A little? The first thing he says to his long-lost sister is that he wants me dead." She shook her head, sighing. "He's just...not what I expected. None of this is. Do you know how long I spent dreaming of coming here?"

"Some dreams are better left unfulfilled," Tisiphone said gently. "Sometimes, reality can never match up to our expectations."

"And sometimes, though we might not realize it, they've already exceeded them," Sheba said quietly, Javen and her parents lingering in her mind.

Chapter 15: Moon and Sun

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 15 – Moon and Sun

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The blond man stepped back from Alex, his sword sliding out of the man's body with an eerie silence. The wind howling across the rooftop made the only sound, though whether it screamed in mourning, anger, or triumph, Ivan could not say.

Alex stumbled for a moment, his hand pressing against his stomach. Mercury Psynergy pulsed, attempting to knit the wound shut, but Ivan knew no Psynergy could close a wound that deep. The pulses wavered, then disappeared as Alex's eyes rolled up into his head, moments before the man collapsed onto the stone roof. Red filled in the background of the great bird emblem beneath his body, slowly spreading through the channels.

The blond man looked away from Alex and met Ivan's eyes from across the roof. The boy unconsciously stepped backwards as Felix and Garet strode past him, both drawing their swords and standing firm against the other man's challenge. Neither spared a glance for the fallen Imilian.

Jenna stepped beside him, laying one hand on his arm gently. When he looked over at her, Ivan could see the deep fury in her face fading, leaving only grief in its wake. She shook her head, the grief sliding behind a mask of determination as she faced forward again, saying everything the girl could not: 'We're not done yet.'

Ivan glanced behind them quickly, seeing Kraden crouched on the stairs to the roof, supporting them from safety, as he always had. The man's old eyes met Ivan's young ones for a moment, before the scholar nodded. He did not smile; Ivan doubted any of them could. The nod was encouragement enough, however.

Feeling the resolve inside him harden once more, Ivan turned forward. On the other end of the roof stood the blond man, breathing heavily as he raised his blade once more, facing the group of four. Ivan could feel the lingering remnants of Jupiter Psynergy everywhere around him, knowing just how much the man had used.

The wind whistled from behind him as he and Jenna drew their swords, moving around to flank their opponent. His eyes snapped between each of them as he slowly stepped backwards, moving towards the edge of the roof to avoid being surrounded. He took each step carefully and precisely, but Ivan watched as the man stumbled once, one knee buckling ever so slightly.

He could hear the voice the wind sang with, this time, for now it sang to him. It echoed in his ears, a glorious tune with a simple melody, one that would someday be turned into a tavern song to be spread to all ends of Weyard. It sang of their exploits, of the struggles, of their loves and their losses.

It sang of their victory, and though the world would join in gratefully, it would never dampen the bittersweet taste that filled Ivan's mouth.

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Garet sighed and kicked at a loose rock as he and Isaac shuffled across the empty plain towards Anemos. The

teleportation sickness had worn off in the last hour, leaving him feeling refreshed, much to his surprise. While it had been bothering him, the only thing he wanted to do was sleep, but now, free from the constant nausea and in the warm night air, he found himself feeling perfectly rested.

After some thought, he realized his vigor was not all that unusual. He had not done anything particularly strenuous today, had slept long the night before, and was no stranger to long periods without sleep. Were he to lay down, he knew he would find himself asleep before long, but so long as he kept moving, the fatigue would not come for a few more hours, at least.

The boredom, however, had settled in shortly upon leaving Contigo.

The flat, open plain between the two cities made it impossible for anything to hide, leaving him nothing to keep his attention watching for. The land itself held nothing interesting around, nor any uneven terrain to warrant his focus. Isaac had been mostly silent since their departure, responding to most conversation attempts with simple, one-word answers.

He was probably tired, Garet realized. Isaac had spent the day prior not only traveling to and from Mars Lighthouse, a several-hour trip, but also wandering for hours within the lighthouse itself. Past the end of another long day, and Garet likely would have been tired, as well. His own adventures in the past few days, though explosive, were brief. Psynergy recovered far more easily than physical stamina.

Though he had surprised himself with his recovery time there, as well. Even before he slept, by the time they had reached the boat, he no longer felt that painful hole in his

mind that accompanied severe Psynergy exhaustion. He had experienced the lingering headache several times, though never so severe as following the fight against the spirits of Anemos' victims, but each one had lasted longer than this one. Had he really improved so much with his Psynergy?

The thought pleased him. He had proven his physical prowess during the Colosso trials, courtesy of the difficult training he put his body through every day, but seeing a marked improvement in his Psynergy since Alchemy's restoration thrilled him as well. Both held equal importance to him, but he knew well that he lacked the inherent talent for Psynergy that Ivan held, and it forced him to train his mind harder to make up for it.

It made sense to him, though. The gods had gifted him with a natural ability for combat, one he had taken up and bonded with easily. A sword felt comfortable in his hands, as if it was meant to be part of his body, instead. To have given him Ivan's penchant for Psynergy, as well... That simply would not be fair. Everyone had to have their weak points, after all.

"Doesn't mean I have to live with them, though," Garet muttered to the sky with a slight grin.

"What?" Isaac asked.

Garet glanced over at his quiet companion. "Just talking to myself."

Isaac nodded and turned his face forward again, scratching at his chest. Garet frowned before looking forward also. Not so much as a witty remark. *Isaac must be really exhausted,* he thought. Mars Lighthouse had been tiring enough to simply explore, but when you added the creatures that had

taken refuge there from the eternal blizzard that howled across the north...

Wait. He wasn't scratching.

Garet glanced back over at him for a moment, then said, "Alright, what's bugging you?"

Isaac looked over at him, his hand continuing to rub at his chest. "Nothing, why?"

"Because you're always fidgeting with that ring when something's bothering you," Garet said, pointing at Isaac's hand, which immediately dropped. "You suck at lying. Out with it."

Frowning at his friend, Isaac returned his eyes to the empty plain ahead, remaining silent. For a long moment, Garet wondered if he might have crossed a line – it certainly would not have been the first time, not even with Isaac. After a few tense moments, however, Isaac sighed. "I feel...wrong."

Garet stared at him. "Wow. Thanks. That detailed explanation cleared everything up for me. I feel so enlightened now, I should go become a monk."

Isaac laughed, a welcome sound that made Garet relax. A young man though he might be, Isaac still had a very boyish laugh, one that never failed to reach his eyes. "You're right, that wasn't very helpful, was it?" He shook his head. "I mean, the way I feel about all this feels wrong."

"About what?" Garet asked. "Anemos?"

"Sort of," Isaac said. "Don't get me wrong, I definitely want to stop them. I have no problems there. It's just... I feel the same way I did back when we were chasing Felix. I felt that

surge of pride in everything I did, thinking that what we were doing was for the good of all of Weyard. I felt like a hero."

Frowning, Garet said, "Well, we *were* heroes. Why wouldn't you feel like that?"

Isaac shook his head. "No, we were heroes for what we did on Mars Lighthouse. Once we joined Felix, once we knew the truth, that feeling went away. I no longer felt like a hero, just that I was doing a job that needed to be done. Like pulling weeds, or getting firewood. It was...different."

"There was no more pride in it," Garet said.

"Yeah," Isaac said, nodding.

The two fell silent as they continued walking. Garet understood exactly what Isaac meant; the same had happened to him, as well. The idea that the two of them had left home in order to save the world filled him with pride. It motivated him to push on when things grew difficult, to find hope when despair threatened to overwhelm them. Only *they* could stop Felix. To fail would be unthinkable.

Following such a complete role reversal when they met in Contigo, however, a crisis of faith about the situation would be expected. Garet struggled for a few days with the revelation that they had been lied to, finding it difficult to muster up the motivation for even simple tasks. Never one to dwell on a problem for long, however, he quickly recognized his new role, forgave himself his past transgressions, and redoubled his efforts.

He thought Isaac had, as well, but that seemed to not have happened. He had found some powerful motivation, certainly, likely the rescue of his and Felix's parents, but

saving the world had dropped off his list. How could he take credit for saving the world after fighting so hard to kill it?

Now, though, in a completely separate situation, the feelings had returned, and justifiably. The Anemoi had more or less outlined their desire to kill everyone not of Jupiter's origin, a crime of unthinkable brutality. The motivation to stop them not only stemmed from Garet's pride, but also his anger, anger at the people who believed themselves to be above all else.

Isaac surely felt the same, or at least similarly enough. Why were these feelings bothering him? "So... What's the problem, then? Do you think we're doing the wrong thing again?"

Shaking his head, Isaac said, "No, absolutely not. This needs to be done." He looked down and sighed again. "I just don't deserve to feel this way. Not after what I've done."

Garet raised an eyebrow. "What, after you've saved the world?"

The other Valean shot him a reproachful glance. "No. After betraying Vale. After what I almost did to my mother. After what I *did* do to my father." Isaac chuckled suddenly, but it held a bitter tone, with none of the cheer his previous laughter had. "I told my father I tried to kill him, you know. After we got back to Vault, I couldn't hold it in. I confessed that I knew the whole time it was him. Do you know what he said?"

Garet shook his head, silent.

"He said he was proud of me," Isaac said, his words nearly dripping with disgust. "He was proud his son made the hard

decision between himself and the world. He was proud of the choice that I've never hated myself more for."

"What else could you have done?" Garet asked. "Would you have left the lighthouse dark?"

"No, and that's what I hate." Isaac shook his head. "I'm no hero. A hero would have found a way to both save my father and light the lighthouse. Choosing one over the other is simply a coward's decision, either way. It's admitting that you can't find a way to shape your own fate, to decide your own path. I have no right to feel like a hero."

Garet frowned. This was *not* his area of specialty. He had no difficulty sorting out his own feelings, but his self-understanding was of little use in trying to help others sort their own out. Mia understood people. She should have been the one having this conversation with Isaac.

But she's not, a voice in his head said. It sounded like Ivan. *You're the one he's telling this to, and you're the only one who can talk to him about it.*

I have no idea what to say, though, Garet argued back against himself. *He's being stupid about this, but I don't know how to tell him that.*

Don't lie to him.

Felix's words echoed in his head once more, and he briefly wondered if that happened to the others, too. The advice still applied, though, and it immediately revealed the first thing Garet should say.

"Isaac, quit whining." His friend glanced over at him sharply, but Garet simply returned the gaze flatly. When Isaac opened his mouth, Garet cut him off. "No, shut up for a

second. You're getting bent out of shape for something that doesn't matter right now. This is a completely different situation."

"But I-"

"Nope, shut up for another second. Actually, go with a minute this time." Garet stopped walking and turned to face the other Valean. "Did you do a bad thing in betraying Vale? Maybe. I don't think so. I never really realized it until we returned, but our town was pretty stupid about some things. For a bunch of people who never left the town, they sure liked to claim knowing a lot about how the world worked. Did we betray Vale's teachings? Yeah, there's not much point denying that. But what was Vale's *purpose,* Isaac?"

Isaac stared at him for a moment. "Am I allowed to talk now?"

Garet rolled his eyes. "Yes."

"Oh, alright then," Isaac said, a small grin playing on his lips. "We were there to keep the world safe from Alchemy."

"Exactly," Garet said, poking his finger into Isaac's chest. "Which is what we're doing right now, just in a different manner. Vale's laws were outdated and no longer served its purpose. But this is all irrelevant," he said, shaking his head. "None of this has anything to do with the Anemoi. If you want to kick yourself for everything we did to restore Alchemy, that's your choice and I won't try to change your mind. But regardless of what you've done in the past, right now, you're a goddamn hero."

Isaac shook his head as well. "I don't think it works like that."

"It does," Garet said firmly. "Restoring Alchemy was in the past. Stopping the Anemoi is a completely different thing. Just because you did something bad before doesn't mean you can't be a hero right *now.* Isn't that what atonement is all about? Making up for bad things by doing good ones? If you insist that you were a coward before, which I still think you're stupid for doing, then make up for it by being a hero now."

Isaac stared at him for a long moment in silence, then sighed. "I guess I can try."

Garet shook his head again. "No, screw that, I don't wanna hear that crap. You hold a portion of the Golden Sun and have not one, but *two* Psynergetically-enhanced swords that were hidden in their respective lighthouses. If you can't be a damn hero with all of that, then pass them off to me and I'll show you how to do it."

Rather than respond, Isaac simply smiled and tilted his head towards Anemos, then turned and resumed walking. Garet fell into step beside him, wondering if he had successfully made his point. There were times that Isaac simply threw up a mask of acceptance and understanding when he just wanted a discussion to end, but Garet prayed this was not one of those times.

Searching for a way to change the subject, a sudden thought occurred to Garet. "Oh yeah, what's going on with you and Feizhi?"

Isaac's hand unconsciously moved up to the ring around his neck, then stopped as he realized it, forcing it back down. "What?"

Garet rolled his eyes. "Have you even talked to her again? You haven't, have you?"

"Well, I just... I don't want to not have an answer for her," Isaac said, refusing to look at Garet.

"Jeez, Isaac, you think ignoring her is gonna help you find that?" Garet shook his head and slapped his arm around Isaac's shoulders. "You don't have to give her an answer right away, but you'll never reach one if you don't spend some time with her. When this is all done, take a couple weeks to visit her. If you haven't made up your mind, stay longer. Stay until you can answer her, one way or the other."

Isaac frowned. "But I've got things to do in Vault. We still need to-"

Garet waved his other hand impatiently. "Don't worry about those things. I can cover you for that. Besides, the work's been slowing down over the past few months. We've already got everyone settled somewhere, it's all touch-up work now. Saving the world twice? I'd say you'll have earned a little vacation time for yourself."

"I just-"

"If you don't go, I'll drag you there myself," Garet said flatly. "And then I'll stick around the whole time, hovering behind you, making sure you're spending time with her. How about that?"

"Fine," he muttered sourly. "I'll go."

Garet pulled his arm from Isaac's shoulders and clapped his back. "Good man. And stop sounding like I'm sending you to wade through swamps and clean up every pile of muck with your tongue. She's just a girl."

Isaac's expression nearly sent Garet dancing with delight.

Sheba paced her luxurious room restlessly, moving from the window, to the wall, to the mirror, to the door, then back to the window. Rage bubbled away inside her like water above a fire, threatening to spill over and scald everything around her. She wanted to smash things, to break them, to tear down the walls and rip apart the floor. She wanted to destroy every inch of her prison she could see, then seek out the unseen parts to continue her rampage.

Tisiphone was the only thing stopping her. The woman herself had said nothing, of course, while Sheba walked back and forth, nor did Sheba believe the woman would do anything to stop her if she started. Though Felix, with his cool, calculating mind, would likely have protested, Sheba could not help but trust the handmaiden. Her gut told the woman could be trusted, and above all logic, reason, and emotion, she trusted her gut.

It would be the handmaiden who cleaned her mess, Sheba knew – Tisiphone and the other servants of the palace. She doubted they really cared whether or not she stayed, except perhaps as the alternative to her terror of a brother. Her rage was directed primarily at the kings, but it would not be they who paid for her random acts of destruction.

So she resisted her urges. She resisted the urge to take the little wooden footstool by her dressing table and hurl it through the window, raining glass into the small garden below. She resisted the urge to unleash a powerful gust to tear her door from its hinges, splintering it into pieces all down the hallway. She resisted the urge to use every muscle in her body to reach up and tear the sheets from her bedding, shredding them like a cat.

With the force of a sucker punch, a brilliant idea suddenly struck Sheba so hard it left her reeling for a moment. She stood in the center of her room, stunned, uncomprehending as to how she had simply overlooked such a simple solution to her problem.

If Ivan could do it, so could she.

Taking a deep breath, Sheba pulled Jupiter Psynergy to herself. She felt the currents around her shift and swirl, falling into a neat, continuous pattern around her. Slowing her breathing, she prodded the flow, adjusting it so that instead of circling her, it enveloped her, withdrawn into her body and emitted from it simultaneously.

She focused on Yallam, seeing the layout of the town clearly in her mind. She could see Sunshine's forge, where they had first met the talented blacksmith. She could see the outside of the inn, originally a great relief to tired eyes and sore feet. She could see the single tree in the field just outside of the town, lit by the moon. Fireflies surrounded it now, though she had no idea if the creatures lived near Yallam. They just seemed fitting.

Her ears rang slightly as her body seemed to fade away from her, as if she had grown lightheaded. Before it could vanish entirely, however, the entire process stopped suddenly, the built-up Psynergy dispersing in an instant.

"No!" she screamed as her eyes snapped open, mind grasping for the pieces of the teleportation technique, but all traces had utterly vanished, the sweat on her forehead the only indication of the attempt.

"I apologize, my lady," Tisiphone said from her spot by the door, bowing low. "Our city has long restricted translocation

inside the city walls. Attempts to enter leave one at the gates, while attempts to leave simply fail."

Sheba did not look at the woman. The anger and fury that had settled with her epiphany returned with vengeance, exploding out in a wordless scream. She walked to the wall and pounded her fist into it several times, wanting nothing more than to take her rage out on something, anything.

This was Tolbi all over again, Tolbi before she met Felix and the others. Fine clothes, lavish quarters, infuriatingly polite servants... All nothing more than paintings to hang on the walls of her cell. She knew well enough that bars and shackles did not make a prison.

A knock on the door spun her around in an instant, though she simply stared at the door for a few seconds. When the knock came a second time, Tisiphone glanced at her questioningly. Sheba hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

Tisiphone opened the door, then stepped to the side, bowing. In the hallway stood two young women, looking a few years older than Felix, peering into the room curiously. They had the same bright, blond, straight hair that many of the Anemoi shared, one wearing it loose, while the other held it tied back in a ponytail. "Excuse us," the latter said, "but do you mind if we come in?"

"What do you want?" Sheba said bitterly. "Come to mock and threaten me, as well?"

The woman shook her head. "No. Just to talk, and if we can, to help."

Sheba stared at them for a moment longer, debating whether or not to trust them, or even if she wanted to talk to anyone, before deciding she did. She doubted that anyone

besides the kings could match her and Tisiphone together, at any rate; hadn't Hydros said that only they were immortal? "Come in, then."

The two stepped inside, bowing slightly to her as they entered. "Thank you, Phoebe," the second said as she closed the door behind her.

"My name is Sheba," the girl snapped, her anger flaring up instantly.

The woman with the ponytail spun to face the other, her hand slapping her on the back of the head. "Mom told you she was using a different name." Turning back to Sheba, the woman shook her head. "I apologize, Sheba. We should have asked first."

Staring at her in confusion, Sheba asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Aisa Urania," the ponytail woman said, then gestured to the other. "This is my sister, Morta."

"Nice to see you again, Sheba," Morta added, bowing slightly in apology.

Sheba stared at them in silence again. Urania. That explained their visit. Now she could see the resemblance in the light blue of their eyes, a stark contrast to their pale skin and hair. "You're King Atropos'...daughters? Sisters?"

"Daughters," Aisa said, moving towards the small chairs that sat around a small table near the wall. "She mentioned your return, as well as your...objections towards it."

Her stomach suddenly turned over. "So she sent you to try and change my mind."

"What? No! No no no!" Morta said quickly, waving her hands. "She just mentioned it to us, so we decided to come see you. We figured you were probably alone here, and needed someone to talk to."

Sheba continued to stare at Morta, her mind pulling together a plan quickly. Psynergy gently pulsed from her mind and reached towards Aisa as Sheba asked, "So you won't be reporting everything I say back to her?"

The answer came twofold: "No, of course not," said Morta, and *Not if you don't want us to,* thought Aisa.

Immediately after the thought passed through Sheba's head, Aisa stepped back, her expression turning hard. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Being safe," Sheba said. "Since Anemos' return, my family has been in danger, my friends have been attacked, and I've been kidnapped. Excuse me for being a bit rude in order to take some precautions." When Aisa's expression calmed a bit, Sheba gestured to the chairs. "Now that I have, please, sit down."

Morta immediately sat down opposite Sheba. Aisa hesitated a moment longer, then seated herself beside her sister. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't really think about it from your perspective. I was just a bit...surprised. I've never had my mind read before."

Sheba sat down as well, the edge of paranoia still not fully leaving her mind. "So. You guys are both princes, right?"

Aisa nodded. "I'm the heir to the Falcon Throne, Morta is the second."

"And I'd like to keep it that way," Morta muttered quietly.

"Falcon Throne?" Sheba said, confused. "Isn't that what I'm heir to?"

"The thrones are sequential in power, not equal," Aisa said. "Each of the kings' heirs inherits the Falcon Throne upon their respective kings' death. If the Roc or Eagle Thrones are empty, then the kings below them get bumped up. So, technically, our mother would be the heir to the Roc Throne, while King Clotho is the heir to the Eagle, and both you and I are the heirs to the Falcon. Whoever succeeds is based on who died."

Sheba nodded. That explained why Clotho seemed to defer to her father that morning. "Doesn't Clotho have an heir?"

Morta snorted. "No. He says he's 'too busy' to work on that right now. And always. He's lucky he lives forever."

"I wouldn't count on that," Sheba said, glancing out the window.

The sisters looked at each other. "Do you really want him killed?" Aisa asked.

"Do you really think he *can* be killed?" Morta added.

Sheba did not answer at first. How much did they know about what happened? How much would their mother have told them? She first thought of changing the subject, then remembered she was talking to the one who would inherit the kingdom someday. "I was at Venus Lighthouse when they attacked," she said, still staring outside at the blue sky. "I watched the worst lightning storm I've ever seen strike the lighthouse that was being visited by a bunch of kids my age, kids who've never seen outside of Lalivero. Had I not been there to draw and divert the lightning, they would have died. My brother was with them. My *real* brother," she

added, glancing back in time to see Morta's mouth open. "I almost died myself."

Sheba shook her head. "And that's only what I saw. Some of my friends watched lightning bolts obliterate part of Tolbi, sending the entire city into a panic during their biggest festival of the year. Another friend's town was sent to sleep in the middle of a northern winter. If she hadn't been found the next day, everyone there would have died. And there were more, too. Other attacks that either failed by chance, or that we just didn't know about."

A silence settled in the room. Sheba glanced around again, double-taking when she spotted Tisiphone still standing by the door; the woman had not said a word and Sheba had forgotten about her entirely. "Come sit down, Tisiphone. We have another chair."

The handmaiden glanced over, shocked. "My lady, I couldn't!"

Sheba frowned. "In that case, I order you to come sit down."

Tisiphone's mouth opened once, then closed again as the woman moved over to the sitting area, seated herself silently with her hands folded neatly in her lap, then locked her eyes onto them and did not move.

Sheba watched her for a moment, then turned back to Aisa. "I also watched him personally attack the King of Lemuria, a peaceful man who works hard to keep his country at peace. Clotho attacked him, and would have killed him, had we not intervened to save him."

Morta's eyes widened. "You fought the Luminous King? And lived?"

Sheba could not help the grin that spilled over her face. "My friend took a full blast of his light to the chest and was perfectly fine four days later. *He* was the one who ran from *us,* a fact he doesn't like being reminded of."

Silence returned, a guest Sheba found frequently visiting recently. This time, though, she found it too overbearing. No background noise traveled through the palace walls. Standing up, she walked to the window and opened it to allow a warm breeze to spill inside. She closed her eyes and welcomed the fresh air gladly, hearing the calls of birds from the roof.

"I think I understand why you hold such hatred for us," Aisa said quietly from behind her. Sheba could tell the woman had followed her to the window, though her movements were silent. "Did you know that, until we landed, Anemos had no birds? The City of Wind, represented and heralded by birds, yet we had none of our own. I'd only seen drawings, and simply heard about their songs."

As Sheba opened her eyes, Aisa stepped beside her at the window, staring out over the city. "I think we've lost a lot in our self-imposed exile. Our city prospers well enough, for one in such an isolated situation as ours. We have no poverty, no homelessness. Our crime is minimal. We live in a great city, but..."

"But in it, you live alone," Sheba finished.

Aisa nodded. "We need the songs of birds in Anemos, but Anemos has no birds left. They all belong to Weyard now. In order to hear their song, we must accept that what we once had is lost, but what we stand to gain is no less beautiful."

Sheba said nothing for a long moment, looking at the city with Aisa. "Is this how others feel?" she asked at last.

"Yes," Aisa said, making a sweeping gesture across the city. "The people here live comfortably. Most are content to live their entire lives in the city's walls, growing and loving and dying. They've never cared about what lies beyond. Now, though... Now, wanderlust has struck many. Their return to a world they've never seen has awakened their curiosity. They wonder what else is out there. What more they might see."

"Only the kings knew of the world, because of their long lives," Sheba said, nodding in understanding.

"Some wish for domination, or isolation, of course, as I'm sure people do in your cultures, but they are the exceptions," Aisa said.

Agatio immediately appeared in Sheba's mind, sneering at her. The man had wanted Alchemy restored to save Prox, like every other Proxian, but she had always felt more to it than that. He held much pride in his people, far more than the others she had met, and frequently boasted of Prox's grand status in the past. He wanted to restore it to that glory, and Sheba had no doubt of the force he would have used to do so.

Yet, as Aisa said, he was the exception, not the rule. Saturos, Menardi, and Karst seemed to have no plans for Prox other than survival, nor did any of the Proxians she met in the town. They merely wanted to keep their home safe, as anyone would.

"Sheba," Morta said, gently laying a hand on her shoulder. "I think there's someone you need to meet."

Aisa looked at her sister briefly, then nodded. "I agree. I think it would do you a lot of good."

The girl turned around and glanced between them warily. "Who is it?"

Morta hesitated a moment, then said, "It's the woman who sent you to Weyard when you were a baby."

Sheba stared at the woman, then shook her head. "You're right, I do want to talk to her. Let's go." She stepped back and motioned to the door, feeling her heart leap as she cast everything aside in the sudden decision. Tisiphone stood to follow her, and Sheba almost told her to stay behind, but then realized the woman's presence did not bother her at all. She simply did not feel like a bodyguard or babysitter to the girl.

Aisa led them out into the hallway, following the same path she had taken that morning to the throne room. When they stepped into the entrance hall, however, they moved to the right, heading for the massive, steel doors that Sheba had seen. Her unasked question as to how anyone could possibly open them became unnecessary when the two guards stepped aside, placing their hands atop a metal sphere on the contraptions at the doors' bases. Jupiter Psynergy hummed as the machines began to spin, the doors themselves slowly swinging outward.

"Going somewhere?"

Sheba spun around, finding the captain of the guard, Damon, standing behind them with a frown on his face. Tisiphone instantly stepped back, moving slightly behind Sheba, but the man paid her no mind. Instead, his firm gaze locked onto Aisa, the heel of his palm settling onto the pommel of the blade at his waist – a silent and subtle threat not unnoticed by Sheba.

"Does she need permission to leave the palace, now?" Aisa asked, one eyebrow raised. "I was under the impression King Lachesis himself gave her leave of the entire city. Are you here on his authority to rescind that?"

Damon's frown deepened, giving him the slight wrinkles his face had not quite yet earned naturally. "I merely find it odd that our young prince remains in her room until you decide to pay her a visit, my prince."

Aisa waved her hand. "Then feel free to scurry off to our parents and sing of our exploits to them. Unless you intend to stop us, leave us alone."

"Be sure to warn them to keep an eye on the city streets," Sheba added. "I'll be leading an army back by sundown."

Damon said nothing, so she turned and began following Aisa once more. Down a wide set of stairs they walked, much of the stone worn and weathered, with several parts replaced with wood. Sheba supposed quarries were a bit difficult to come by on a floating island, after all.

They set off down one of the streets in silence as Sheba glanced around. Though she had seen the buildings from a distance and found their appearance unremarkable, up close she could not help but be impressed by their construction. Though initially constructed with bricks of stone and clay, like those in Contigo, Sheba could see an odd sheen covering the walls. As she passed close to one, she reached out and ran her hand across it, finding the surface cool and flawlessly smooth, almost like glass. Some sort of hardened paste, she assumed, one that would protect the stone from the damage that time and weather brought.

As they walked, Sheba found herself surprised at the city. Not at anything in particular, or even a general

magnificence, though; she was surprised simply at how *normal* everything seemed. A quiet murmur filled the streets in the lull of late afternoon, as people filtered home for dinner. Every now and then, Sheba heard the sudden shout of someone, or the squeal of a young child, but even those failed to break the calm atmosphere.

She saw bakeries and cobblers, barbers and tailors. She saw what seemed to be a few bars, their doors closed but windows lit, people moving about inside as they cleaned and set up. The clear ringing of a smith's hammer echoed down from a side street, while the smell of a roasting steak wafted along through another.

The people that passed her gave her no more than a cursory glance. In many parts of the world, her bright, blond hair had earned many stares from the locals, yet here, everywhere she looked, she saw yellow, green, and as everywhere else, the aged silver. Only once did she see brown hair, though it was almost light enough to be called orange.

They milled about their business around her, oblivious to their surreal appearance to the girl. How could they know? Why would they think anything odd about their shopping for the evening's meal, or meeting some friends for an afternoon drink? What was so strange about an old couple sitting on a bench and watching the passerby, or a group of sweaty men unpacking a slew of crates?

The city seemed no different from those she had seen elsewhere, and this truth baffled Sheba. Ever since hearing about the legends of the city in the sky, the people who were so advanced they lifted their entire country into the air, she had imagined...well, the unimaginable. Her mental image shifted and changed the more she saw, combining all

the fantastic creations of her imagination with all the equally fantastic creations of various cultures. She had expected a city of light, shimmering all through the night. She had expected a city of steel, turning as red as the ocean during sunset. She had expected a city of towers, stretching like fingers to grasp the stars from the sky.

She had never once imagined this.

"Here," Aisa said, stepping to the side of the street. Before them stood a house as unremarkable as the rest, looking identical to the others nearby. Sheba wondered briefly how Aisa knew which house to stop at.

"Take this," Morta said, holding something out.

Sheba took it and turned it over in her hand, finding what appeared to be a small tuning fork, only a few inches long, with a cord slipped through a hole in one end. She hesitated briefly, then threw it around her neck, slipping the fork beneath her shirt. "What is it?"

"A way of contacting me," Aisa said, pulling another one from beneath her shirt. "Push a little Psynergy into it and talk, and I'll hear it through mine. Once you're done here, let me know and we'll come back for you."

Sheba nodded, then glanced at the building again. "You're not coming in?"

Aisa shook her head. "We'd be intruding. This is for you."

"We'll be in the area in case anything comes up," Morta said, then turned and walked back up the street with her sister. Sheba watched them go in silence, her hand moving up to lightly touch the tuning fork through her shirt.

"I will wait here for you, my lady."

Sheba jumped slightly, then turned to Tisiphone, feeling a bit embarrassed. She had nearly forgotten the woman was there. "Are you sure? Aren't you following me to keep me safe?"

Tisiphone shook her head. "There is no harm waiting for you in here."

The girl stared at her for a moment, then nodded again. "If you say so." Turning back to the building, Sheba stepped forward and knocked on the door three times.

"Ah, come in, please!" a woman's voice called from inside.

Sheba pulled her hand back and hesitated for a moment, then pulled open the door and stepped inside. The house's interior was small, only one room, but neatly maintained. She could see an iron stove against the left wall, a small wooden table beside it, while a bed took up the opposite wall's corner. In the center of the room sat a green-haired woman, scrubbing at some clothes in the large basin of water in front of her.

She looked up as Sheba closed the door behind her, confused, then smiled. "Wrong house?" she guessed.

"I don't think so," Sheba said, frowning. "I was brought here and told I should talk with you. I'm Sheba."

The woman laid her clothes back into the basin and stood up, drying her hands on an apron. "Well, I'm not sure why someone thought you should talk to me, Sheba. I don't think we've met before. I'm Leda."

"Nice to meet you," the girl said, then hesitated. How exactly did she go about bringing this up? "I'm sorry, this is still a bit awkward to me. I'm not really sure how to start."

Walking over to her and peering more closely at her face, Leda shook her head, frowning also. "Well, who was it that brought you here?"

"Umm..." Sheba suddenly felt awkward. How exactly did she tell this woman that one of her city's princes had dropped her off on her doorstep? "It's a bit of a long story."

Leda's eyes narrowed very slightly. "That shouldn't change the answer."

Great. Now she's suspicious of me, Sheba thought, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. "Well, this may sound ridiculous without the background, but...it was Prince Aisa."

The woman's eye movement reversed, then kept going. "Prince Aisa? Why- Who are you?"

Shaking her head, she said, "I told you, my name is Sheba." A sudden thought occurred to her. "And though I don't want to use it, maybe you know me as Phoebe, instead?"

Leda's gasp cut through the serenity of the house, easily covering the ambient noise drifting in through her open window. Her hands reached out to steady herself on the chair beside her as her whole body suddenly trembled slightly. "Who... Who are you?"

Sheba swallowed, not wanting to speak the rest. "I'm... I mean, my name was once Phoebe Moirae, when I was born here. I was told you were the one who sent me down to Weyard."

The sound that came from Leda's mouth could not be described in words by Sheba. The closest she could come to describing it was the sound of a bubble collapsing underwater, combined with the caw of a crow, yet coming out like a hiccup. The woman's hands flew to her mouth, covering them as her eyelids strained against her face.

Staring at Leda warily, Sheba still could not react in time as the woman rushed her. Panic erupted inside her as the Anemian reached out and grabbed her, but before the wind she unconsciously summoned could be released, she realized the woman had not attacked her.

She had embraced her.

And she was crying.

As Sheba held her in confusion, something tickled the back of her mind. She instinctively pressed the side of her head against Leda's, her mind buzzing behind her ears. She recognized the feeling as the same she felt when a stray thought or word triggered memories of the previous night's dream, forgotten with the rising of the sun. Struggling to grasp the fragments of the feeling, Sheba closed her eyes, leaning into the woman's hug.

And all at once, she recognized the arms of her mother around her, holding her long-lost daughter tight.

Her eyes widened in the same manner as Leda's had only moments before as the realization settled around her with such absolute certainty. It was not a guess, not a hunch, but an undeniable fact. The touch brought to surface flashes of memory she never knew existed, little more than sounds and gentle caresses.

She stepped back slowly, Leda's arms slow to release their strong clasp. As Sheba looked upon her birth mother's face again, she found tears flowing down the sides. The sight of them stirred some ache in her chest; was it guilt, at having none of her own? "You're my mother," she said slowly. When the woman nodded, she continued, "But...I thought you were the one who sent me to Weyard."

"I was," Leda said quietly, her voice wavering. "I couldn't bear seeing you grow up to be like one of those monsters. Your father... He's a cold man, the kingdom his only duty. He would have never given you the love you deserved. I prayed you would find better on the surface." She stared at Sheba for a moment, a questioning look on her face.

Sheba nodded now. "I did. A great family took me in. I have a father, a mother, and a little brother I love." She smiled slightly. "His name is Javen, and I miss him so much. I miss all of them."

Leda sat back down in her chair, closing her eyes and sighing. "Good. That's good. I'd always worried that...I don't know, that you had died, or been taken as a slave, or raised to be a monster anyway, or a hundred different terrible things." She suddenly opened her eyes again, gesturing across the table. "I'm so sorry, please, sit down!"

The girl did so, seating herself across from her mother, but found herself with nothing to say. She had dreamed of meeting her real family for so long, of talking to them, of learning who they were, but now that she sat in front of one who she *actually* wanted to do so with, she could think of nothing.

"You've grown so much," Leda said softly. "You're a young woman now, and so beautiful." The woman wiped at her

eyes, shaking her head. "I'm sorry, I'm falling to pieces over here, rambling about."

Sheba smiled. "That's alright. Had you been the first one I met, I probably would be too, but...well, I didn't. I'm the one who should be sorry. I feel so...so detached right now."

Leda shook her head again. "You have every right to be. I know your father, and I've heard about your brother."

"Is he not your son?" Sheba asked, confused.

"No," Leda said, a small smile coming to her face. "After I sent you away, I was exiled from the noble quarter. Evidently your father did have *some* love for me, otherwise I would have been executed." The woman looked down at the table for a moment before saying, "Phoebe, what- Sorry, I mean, Sheba, what-"

"You have every right to use that name," Sheba interrupted softly. "From you, I would answer to it."

"Thank you," her mother said, "but when I sent you away, I lost the right to it. Phoebe would have been the king's daughter. You are Sheba now." The woman sighed, wringing her hands in her lap. "But I wanted to ask, what do you want to do? Do you want to stay here?"

"No," Sheba said instantly, the word coming out with more force than she intended. "Not like this, at least. My friends and I... We're not going to allow this war to happen. We're going to stop the kings."

Leda's eyes widened again as she leaned forward. "You can't be serious! You'll be killed if you try!"

Shaking her head, Sheba said with a smile, "You don't know my friends. We've beaten demigods, dragons, and the lighthouses themselves. We've fought Clotho to a retreat once already. If anyone can do it, we can."

"And if no one can?" the woman asked quietly.

"Then I will die trying," Sheba said firmly. "I would rather die trying to stop them than live under their rule."

Leda stared at her in silence for a moment, despair creeping onto her face. It touched her slightly widened eyes as she blinked back tears once more, her eyes never leaving Sheba's. After a moment, though, she smiled, pride chasing the despair away. "You have a good heart, Sheba. A strong heart. I could never fight like you do."

"I have too many things to fight for," she said, glancing at the window and the gently wafting curtain. Birdsong drifted in with the breeze, a simple melody that repeated twice before stopping. "...And now I suppose I have more." She turned back to her mother, laying her hands flat on the table. "I need to leave, but I will return. They've set things up so that they think no one can stop them, but we're going to. We *have* to. We can't-"

Several loud booms entered through the window now, causing Sheba to stop mid-sentence. It took her a few moments to recognize them as thunderclaps, though too low to be natural.

Psynergy.

She could think of only one reason someone would be using such offensive Psynergy.

"I need to go," Sheba said quickly, jumping to her feet and knocking the chair over backwards. "My friends are here." She turned to the doorway, then stopped. Spinning back around, she ran to Leda and threw her arms around her. "I'm glad I got to meet you. I promise, I'll be back to see this through."

As she spun back around to leave, Leda called out, "Wait!" Sheba turned around yet again to find the woman fumbling with her wrist, and after a moment, she held out a gold bracelet to her. "This was given to me by my mother. I'd like you to take it, Sheba, so that no matter where you are, no matter how much you might come to despise this place, you'll know there's someone here who loves you. Always."

Sheba hesitated for a moment, then walked back to her mother, throwing her arms around her again. "Thank you," she whispered. "For everything."

"I'm so proud of you, Sheba," Leda said, stepping back as she clasped the bracelet around Sheba's wrist. "Be strong."

The girl glanced down at the charm, finding two gems set into the gold, that of a brilliant green swan looking up at her, its wings wrapped around a glittering red egg. She looked back up at her mother for a moment, smiled and said, "I'll see you soon," then ran out the door.

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Behind them, the sun sat low in the sky, crimson light radiating out across it. Above them, the bright, warm colors faded away, leaving the solid blue of early evening overhead. Before them, deep purple framed the gate of Anemos, the shadow in the sky seeming to settle over the city itself. The only light in the eastern sky came from the moon, slowly rising to take the sun's place.

Felix stopped before the gate, peering through the iron to the city beyond. As each of them had reported upon returning, no guards patrolled the gate or walls. Some movement could be seen further down the road, but Felix saw only the mundane travels of the Anemoi at the end of a long day.

Etched into the walls, and continuing through the twisted wrought iron of the gate, was a continuous ring of runic symbols. He glanced at them briefly, but had no idea if they were anything more than a decoration, so he focused his attention back to the gate.

The gate itself was locked, but Felix knew that would prove no challenge to overcome. Instead, he turned around to face the others. In their faces, he could see the same determination mirrored from his own. The seven of them, as well as two others, had managed to join back together in the most unlikely of situations. Their single will was evident in more than just their presence, as well; he could feel the cohesion of the group pull them tighter than it had previously, with none of the uncertainty or hesitation that had been present in Lemuria.

He had no words for them.

Turning back around, he reached out and touched the gate. His mind slipped into the large lock binding the two halves together, navigating the dark corridors in silence and ease. One by one he lifted the tumblers, feeling them slip into place before moving on to the next. When the last tumbler clicked, he gently shoved it away from him.

The gates swung open with a long whine, breaking the silence they had undoubtedly held for centuries. He stepped forward after them, crossing the border into Anemos. He had

wondered if the very ground would protest him, offended by the presence of an outside after so long without one, but the path felt no different from the nearly vanished one they had taken here.

The people were a different story. Though no alarms were raised and no weapons unslung (though he could see none, at any rate), the squeal of the iron gate drew the attention of several nearby. Their mouths fell open as they pointed at the intruders, speaking in hushed tones to those nearby. As Felix stepped forward, they backed away, ducking into houses and side streets, though a few pairs of eyes continued to watch from behind windows.

"It's all so elaborate," Hama murmured from behind him.

Felix could not disagree. The buildings had the solid construction and decoration style of a strong city, like Tolbi or Kalay. He wondered if Anemos even had slums. "Let's keep moving before word spreads."

"Where to?" Isaac asked. "That building in the distance?"

Felix nodded. "I would bet on that being the palace, and if they sent one of their kings to get Sheba, I'm sure they'll be keeping her close."

As they continued on, he heard Garet mutter, "Right into the wolves' den..." Felix found the imagery eerily accurate, but saw no other way to approach. They would never remain unseen, not even at night, and creeping around while searching for Sheba would only give time for their presence to become known. Their best bet would be to move quickly and directly.

Silence escorted them through the city. A tense hush announced their arrival and lingered after their departure,

as if breaking it would bring them back. Not even Garet spoke again for some time, the man falling to the back and frequently turning around.

Wooden boards covered the streets, though in a few alleys that evidently experienced low traffic, Felix could see smooth brick beneath, obviously worn and broken. Gently probing beneath the boards with his mind, he found a similar scene beneath, damaged enough to warrant the installation of a new street surface. *Downside of racial genocide: having to fix your streets the hard way,* he thought wryly.

Eventually the street spread out to twice the normal width as it settled into a straight line to the palace. With no obstacles in sight, they upped their pace, reaching the plaza before the palace in a matter of minutes.

"Good gods," Ivan breathed, staring up at the palace doors as they started up the stairs leading to them.

Felix said nothing, but silently agreed. Standing at double the height of normal doors, yet constructed of what seemed to be solid steel, he could not help but wonder how the Anemoi opened them. Such a door, even on hinges, would be nearly immovable.

"Who are you?"

His eyes shifted slightly to a guard standing to one side of the door, his hand now resting on his sword hilt. A quick glance to the other side revealed a second guard, both who Felix had ignored entirely on his approach. Had he simply been that inattentive, or had he merely unconsciously dismissed them? He could see the sweat on their foreheads from the afternoon's heat, but knew another kind had now joined it. The furtive, skittish way their eyes bounced around

between all of them told Felix more than he needed to know about their experience as guards.

"We're here for Sheba," Felix said calmly, continuing up the steps.

"What? Prince Sheba?" the second guard asked.

A sudden snort prefaced the comment that Felix instantly knew Garet would make. "*Prince* Sheba? What?"

"We don't have time for this," Alex murmured, stepping up next to Felix and waving his hand. The stone of the palace wall reached out and wrapped around the two guards like fingers, ensnaring them in a firm grip. A pulse of Jupiter Psynergy followed and both guards' heads dropped, the pair falling asleep instantly.

Felix nodded his appreciation, stopping as he reached the doors. He glanced at Alex briefly as the man followed him, and when he looked over as well, Felix felt their minds synchronize wordlessly. Each held out a hand to the doors, Venus Psynergy taking hold of the steel with ease. They swung open slowly, a metallic cracking sound coming from inside as they moved.

Another pair of guards appeared in the growing gap, drawing their swords, but something in the air rippled as it passed Felix. In the next instant, both guards were airborne, sailing away from the doors as their swords clattered to the ground. Felix felt Hama step up behind him, muttered, "Let's go," then resumed pulling the door open.

Felix cleared the threshold first, Alex following directly behind him, both sweeping their eyes across the entrance hall quickly. He moved forward after finding no immediate threats, though he kept his hand on the hilt of his sword.

After a second glance across, he turned back around. "Garet, Jenna, Mia, hold the entrance and guard our backs. Piers, Hama, take the left stairs. Isaac, Ivan, take the right. Alex, come with me," he finished, gesturing towards the doors along the opposite wall, where two more guards had just been incapacitated by Hama. "Sweep as quickly as possible. Find Sheba and get back here."

"I've seen this place before," Ivan murmured. "In a dream."

"Do you have any idea where they might be keeping her?" Felix asked immediately.

Ivan shook his head and Felix wasted no more time on questions, but simply moved across the hall. A long staircase lay behind the doors, which he and Alex began to climb two at a time. The stones of the walls attacked the guards that awaited them above, shifting out to slam into the sides of their heads. Both fell at once, one rolling down the stairs for a moment before folding into a position that stopped him.

Felix threw open the doors at the top and stepped outside, sunlight faintly kissing the back of his neck. The stairs led to the roof, evidently, though when he glanced around, he realized it actually served as the throne room. *Fitting,* he thought.

As he turned around, scanning the rooftop, he discovered someone else around the corner, standing at the western edge of the roof, looking out over the city. The blond woman turned around as Felix stepped out, looking at him with a confused expression. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Friends of Sheba," he said shortly. "Where is she?"

"I see she was right to put her faith in you," the woman said, a smile rising on her face. "You must be close friends,

indeed, to invade the Palace of Anemos."

"Answer me," Felix snapped. "Where is she?"

Irritation flickered across the woman's face for a moment, quickly replaced by the smile. "I don't answer to commoners."

Felix felt the sharp charge of Jupiter Psynergy form in an instant, but before he could so much as move, the woman lashed out with a fierce bolt of lightning. No sooner had the bright bolt seared its image on his eyes, however, it rebounded off to the side mere inches in front of him.

The air before him shimmered slightly as Alex stepped around him, the reflective Psynergy dispelling. "You must be either King Moirae or Urania, I presume."

The woman raised an eyebrow, then laughed. "And you must be the Mercurian Lycoris spoke of. You're right, boy. I am King Atropos Urania."

Alex frowned suddenly. "Atropos? Surely not the same Atropos that reigned when Alchemy was sealed?"

"The same," she said, placing one hand on her hip. "Are you a scholar of history, Mercurian?"

"Not in particular," Alex said slowly. "Mythology is more of my subject of choice, though as I'm sure you can imagine, mythology and Anemian history overlapped quite extensively until recently."

"Alex..." Felix muttered, glancing around them cautiously. Having one of the kings in front of them meant nothing if the other two could still show up. They needed to move now.

"Your dog seems to be in a hurry to leave," Atropos said, tilting her head slightly. "Surely you don't prefer our young prince's presence to mine?"

Alex nodded. "So is Sheba your child, then? Or is she a Moirae?"

Atropos snorted. "She belongs to Lachesis, not me. Why do you think I haven't killed you yet? I'm far more interested in watching this play out than I am in stopping you."

"Then would you be so kind as to point us in her direction?" Alex asked.

Shaking her head, the king smiled again. "I think not. I would have more fun toying with you, I think." She pointed her hand at Alex again as the shimmering barrier appeared once more, but it had no effect on the slowly-flowing Jupiter Psynergy that appeared. Felix could feel the invisible tendrils reach out and attach to Alex, his energy immediately moving towards Atropos.

The Imilian jerked back suddenly, the connection severed as both Alex and Atropos stared at each other in surprise. "What was-" she began, but Alex cut her off.

Swinging his hand up, the stone roof spiraled up around her, winding and twisting around her body and trapping her in place. Before she could respond, Alex grabbed Felix's arm. "Looks like we're going to have to jump," he said quickly, then ran for the edge of the roof. Felix had seen Ivan and Sheba jump from enough heights to hazard a guess as to Alex's plan, though the thought still made him uncomfortable.

The two reached the edge of the palace and leapt off without hesitation. Felix felt his stomach rise up as he

watched the ground approach, but he forced the feeling aside and kept his eyes locked. The last thing he needed would be to injure himself from an assisted landing.

Fierce winds whipped into existence beneath him as he approached, buffering his body as if he were no more than a sheet of paper. He wobbled slightly above the currents, then dropped the remaining few feet to the ground, landing solidly. Alex landed beside him, immediately turning his gaze back up, but Atropos had not followed.

His attention next shifted to the side of the palace, where several guards now emerged, likely from some barracks, though he still found the number far smaller than he expected. What intrigued him were the weapons they carried – short rods that seemed to open on one end, with handles on the other. Though he initially worried they might bring archers, since the guards were out of effective range of their Psynergy, he now found himself more curious as to what they would do.

When the guards shouted, he regretted that curiosity.

Without any buildup or warning, other than their shouts, wells of Jupiter Psynergy suddenly appeared above himself and Alex. Lightning snapped down from the great pool in the air, dropping down like water leaking from a glass. The bolts were small and frequent, many missing entirely, but not entirely ineffective. When the first one struck Felix, he hissed in pain as a line of fire moved from his head down to his left foot, instantly numbing afterward.

He immediately raised the ground around him, forming a cover above his head to shield himself. He watched as Alex held one hand in the air, his reflective barrier repelling the strikes with ease as he walked towards the guards. As he

neared, they dropped their weapons and drew swords, but a simple swipe of Alex's hand sent them all flying into the palace wall. Two stood back up, only to slam back into the wall, and did not stand again.

Felix dropped his makeshift roof and followed Alex, who had picked up one of the strange rods. As Felix approached he held it up, saying, "Seems to launch Psynergy, so it can be used at a larger range. It's probably the same technology that was used in Anemos' initial attack."

"We need to get back inside," Felix said, nodding his head towards the front doors. He could see Jenna standing just outside them, her eyes scanning the area.

When they reached the doors, Garet did a double-take when he saw them. "Didn't you guys...?" He trailed off in confusion, pointing back into the palace.

"Met a king on the roof," Felix said quickly. "Got away. Sheba?"

Mia shook her head, taking the Anemian rod that Alex handed to her. "Isaac and Ivan just got back, they couldn't find her."

As Felix turned to the left staircase, frowning and wondering what was taking Piers so long, the sailor suddenly appeared – sprinting back towards the entrance hall, with Hama right behind him. Before anyone could say anything, however, a bolt of white light crashed into the wall behind them, exploding violently. Piers stumbled and continued running, but the blast lifted Hama up and threw her over the railing unceremoniously.

"Hama!" Ivan shouted, dashing over to where she had fallen. The woman had already picked herself up by the time he

reached her, mumbling something inaudible to him, then placed her arm around his shoulders as they moved back towards the doors.

Felix returned his gaze to the top of the stairs as Piers reached the bottom, heading for them as well. From the hallway emerged Clotho, walking casually towards the stairs. White-hot rage instantly flared up in Felix, taking much effort to push back down to manageable levels. "Where is she?" he shouted at the king.

"You're annoyingly stubborn, aren't you?" the man asked as he took the steps one at a time, slowly and gracefully. "Phoebe's place is here, not with you worms. Your feet have no right to step inside this palace."

As Clotho touched the ground level, a great gale rushed towards them. Felix watched the wind nearly pick up Ivan, settling instead for throwing both him and Hama into a backwards tumble. As they reached the stairs outside, Hama grabbed hold of her brother and shoved hard against the ground, avoiding the painful roll down the stairs by jumping the entire way.

Mia's saving grace turned out to be her proximity to the door – instead of blowing outside with the two siblings, she caught hold of the doorframe before she could lose control, holding herself onto it. Felix crouched down, pressing his hands into the stone floor and sealing them inside. Isaac moved similarly, though using his sword instead of his hands.

Alex stepped in front of the remaining ones, placing both palms together in front of him like a spear. The winds parted for him, allowing the three he shielded to back down the stairs in a controlled fashion.

As the wooden doors leading to the throne roof opened, the winds died down. Atropos stepped through the doors, her eyes immediately fixing on Alex. Felix stood back up, a quick glance backward telling him Mia had followed the others. Turning back to the pair of kings, he drew his sword quietly, stepping up next to Alex as Isaac did the same opposite him.

"Well," Clotho said, smiling. "If it isn't our overconfident Venusian, our royal knight, and the Worm King himself! Did you bring any other kings with you, or will this have to satisfy me for today?"

Alex's smile mirrored the Anemian's. "Worm King, is it? That doesn't seem very distinguishing."

Clotho shrugged. "I am afraid your refusal to introduce yourself has left me at a disadvantage there, so I have no choice but to be generic."

"Ah, that's true, I did promise you an introduction later," Alex said, nodding. "Very well. I am Alex Ambrosen of Imil, here as the unofficial representative of the Mercury Clan." He bowed deeply to them, dropping his head down. Once his hair had fallen over his eyes, he flicked them briefly to Felix, where they lingered for a moment before returning as he stood up.

At once Felix understood. Alex would do what Alex did best, of course: talk. He did not see the point, though, given that no one was left inside to search the palace. Given their situation, however, he could see no downside to stalling. Atropos, though not having taken her eyes from Alex, held her silence and position.

"Unofficial? Why is that?" Clotho asked, tapping his cheek.

Alex's smile twitched briefly, then steadied. "Regretfully, I had to accept the mantle of traitor and exile when I chose to restore Alchemy, against my clan's wishes and teachings. Before I belong to the Mercury Clan, however, I belong to a far greater clan: that of Weyard."

Now Clotho bowed to Alex, though it lacked the sharp contempt and sarcasm Alex seemed to inject into his body language. "I suppose gratitude is in order, then. Without your work, we would still be drifting through the sky, waiting for someone to take their fates back into their own hands."

"My hands are the only place I would keep my fate," Alex said, holding them up as he spoke. "I think that is where everyone should keep theirs. Why else would I come here tonight? Your young prince deserves the right to handle her own fate, as well."

Laughter echoed throughout the entrance hall as Clotho tilted his head back. "You play this game well, Clanless King! Tell me, though, if she should hold her own fate, why do you fight in her place?"

"Not everyone can wield power through strength of Psynergy," Alex said calmly, shaking his head. "Those that lack the strength themselves have no choice but to inspire others to fight in their stead...to fight for a purpose."

Clotho raised an eyebrow. "And you fight for her, then? You fight for her freedom?"

Alex smiled. "Your prince would make a great king, if she chose that path. See all that she has inspired?"

"Very well, then," Clotho said, spreading his arms. "Fight for her, then. Fight for her freedom by sacrificing your own!"

Isaac reached over one shoulder to draw his sword, then paused. After a brief internal debate, he switched shoulders and tugged on the other hilt the way Garet had showed him. The metal clasp unsnapped as the enormous blade came loose, swinging around to settle in front of Isaac.

It felt strange to him, holding a sword in front of him with the weight of another sword still on his back.

In some ways, it almost felt like a betrayal. He had certainly grown attached to his sword, in no part due to its strange enhancement of his Psynergy. Turning it aside right now for this other blade, saying it was not good enough to help now...

He shook his head. Such thoughts were distractions. Inhaling slowly, he raised the sword above his head slowly, taking care to maintain it steady. He could feel the great power quietly pushing against the constraints of the blade, searching for release.

I will free you, he thought, and closed his eyes.

His mind moved from his head, up his arms, through his hands, and into the sword itself, settling into the great gemstone that adorned the hilt. In his mind the gem flashed once, turning into Mars' beacon. He stood atop the lighthouse again as snow drifted down lazily around him in the darkness, the great blade of Prox still in his hand.

The power of Mars enveloped him so thickly that he doubted he could have used his own Psynergy if he tried. He could feel it pressing into him like a thousand hands. Was he being judged? Tested? Examined? He could not say. He felt that

the thousand hands belonged to a hundred thousand sets of eyes, but he stood alone on the aerie.

He turned back to the beacon, straightening his back and lifting his head. "I need your power," he said firmly into the silence, watching as the swirls of red and white light endlessly shifted across the beacon's surface. "As the one who sacrificed everything to light you, I ask that you help me now. Release your power for me. Release the power in this blade."

Silence answered him, broken only momentarily by a brief burst of wind. He stood there for a long moment amidst the drifting snowflakes, watching the beacon, but it did nothing different than usual. He scanned the swirling colors, trying to find some answer or pattern in their designs, but nothing appeared to him.

When the beacon went dark, the stones of the aerie vanished from beneath him. He let out a surprised shout as he began to fall through the darkness, tumbling all around with no sense of direction.

Isaac pulled his mind back from the blade with a sudden jerk, stepping backwards. He shook his head briefly at Felix, who held a single eye locked on him, but before he could say anything, Clotho laughed again.

"Was such a pretty blade meant to deter me?" he asked, placing his hands on his hips. He shook his head and glanced to the stairs. "Retrieve my sword," Clotho said to a guard standing there. He turned back to Isaac and the others with a casual sweep of his hand.

Wind slammed into Isaac's chest, hurling him back out the door with ease. He lost sight of Felix and Alex as he spun through the air, but when more wind reached out to stabilize

him, he saw that they had similarly been caught off-guard. Ivan lowered each of them to the ground carefully, asking something, but Isaac had already focused on the palace doors as Clotho stepped through them, followed by Atropos.

"Wouldn't want to cause unnecessary damage to the palace," he said casually. "Now. Do you have a preference as to the order of your deaths?"

"Yours will come first," Felix called out, standing back up and moving forward. "Give Sheba back to us, and I will ensure it is a quick death."

Shaking his head again, Clotho said, "How many times must I tell you that Phoebe's place is with us?"

"How many times do I have to tell you that *my name is not Phoebe?"*

Isaac's head snapped to the side, finding Sheba emerging from the mouth of a side street near them. Behind her stood a growing mass of yellow and green-haired people, gathering to watch the spectacle. The girl walked steadily towards her friends, her hands balled into fists as she stared at Clotho. "My name is Sheba!" she shouted, straightening her back and standing as tall as her fifteen years allowed. "The same Sheba who told you I would start a war within your walls!"

Felix moved across the plaza to shift their defensive line to cover her as well, visibly suppressing an urge to simply run to the girl, while the others moved forward. Clotho made no movement towards them, however, simply standing there with a smirk on his face.

As the three parties reconverged, Jenna nearly flew at Sheba, scooping the girl up into a hug and spinning her

around as she squealed in joy. "I was so worried about you Sheba I can't believe they took you I just wanted to come straight here and beat the-"

Hama placed her hand on the girl's shoulder as Isaac returned his gaze to the kings, who had still not yet moved. Clotho's smirk seemed to only grow larger, creating a sense of unease in the bottom of Isaac's stomach. "Rejoice later, Jenna," the woman said. "We need to leave. Ivan, are you ready?"

To Isaac's surprise, it was Sheba's voice that answered. "No, we can't. There's no teleporting inside the city, in or out. We have to run for it."

The unease solidified as Clotho's smirk became a full smile, his teeth staring out like a hungry animal's. "That's right. You're trapped in here with us. Run if you like, if you think you can make it out before I kill you all. Perhaps some of you might. You, Phoebe, will not be one of them," he added, looking past Isaac at the girl.

No one answered for a moment. Isaac knew as well as the others that Clotho's words were not an empty threat. He would have little trouble picking them off as they ran. Yet, if fighting him could not be avoided, they would do better to stand here and fight both him and Atropos, praying the third king did not arrive. What could they do, though? Their last fight resulted in a stalemate, with both King Hydros and Alex present, and against only a single king. Against two...

"Why would we run?" Sheba called out, much to Isaac's confusion. She might be a bit overconfident at times, but she knew as well as he did that they stood no chance. "Do you really think anyone here is afraid of you?"

Clotho's smile vanished immediately. "You would be stupid to not be."

"I dunno," she continued. "I mean, I have no doubt you could beat us to the gate. No one can run away faster than the great Sovereign of the Ostrich, after-"

"Silence!" Clotho shouted, his words piercing Isaac's head sharply, forcing the young man to clutch at it with his empty hand. The king stared at them for a moment, turning only when the guard arrived with his sword. Isaac moved his hand to see it clearly, finding a blade that looked more like some long, terrible pitchfork than a sword. The blade split after emerging from the hilt, as if someone had simply cut out the center of it.

Clotho took hold of the weapon silently, letting the tips rest on the ground. He turned back at them, then looked over to his other side. "My dear king, I do not believe your assistance will be necessary."

Atropos glanced at Alex briefly, one eyebrow raised, then back at her fellow king. "You are certain?"

"I need no help for such worms," he said calmly, the anger gone from his voice. "Nor will I be remembered asking for it. I ask that you withdraw."

The woman again looked at Alex, her gaze lingering even longer this time, before nodding. "Very well. I will wait for our young prince's return." She bowed slightly to him, then turned and walked back to the palace.

Isaac glanced behind him and found a triumphant glow on Sheba's face, though she struggled to keep it hidden. She had just made this fight winnable. But...did they really need

everyone to win it? Was it worth that risk? "Alex, I think I have a better idea."

"Speak it quickly, then," the man said, his eyes never leaving Clotho.

"Everyone else runs for the gate," Isaac said simply. "You and I stall him. When they're gone, we warp out."

"What? Why are you staying?" Garet asked.

Before Isaac could answer, Alex chuckled. "I see. Strangely fitting, yet also practical. Have you learned to use it yet?"

"Not yet," Isaac said, shaking his head. "But now's as good a time as any to learn." Turning to Felix, he held out the Proxian blade. "Here. I won't need this. See if you can figure it out."

"You'll be back to do that yourself," Felix said firmly, but took the blade regardless, turning around and ushering the others away. He paused as they started moving and turned his head slightly, not quite looking over his shoulder. "Isaac, Alex... Don't die."

Isaac drew his normal sword as Felix followed the others, the familiar weight settling perfectly into his hand. Their unseen connection clicked into the back of his mind with a comfortable warmth, like the feel of his own pillow, in his own bed, in his own house.

As he stepped forward with Alex, Clotho shook his head. "Stall me? Why would I bother remaining to toy with you?" His wings unfolded from his back in a burst of light, stretching out and flapping once to flex them. Crouching briefly for an added burst, the Luminous King jumped into the air as his wings pushed down, powering into the air.

When Alex raised a hand, he immediately crashed back down.

His eyes snapped up at the Mercurian in anger and confusion, but Alex simply wagged a finger at him. "The Clanless King did not dismiss his audience yet."

Clotho gaped at him, still not understanding. Isaac found the loss of his arrogance and sense of control very satisfying. "But... Gravity? How?"

"Hydros may be the last of Weyard's old kings, but I am here to usher in a new era," Alex said, spreading his arms. "I am Alex Ambrosen, heir to the throne of Weyard and the Alchemy that flows within her. Clanless not only by choice, but by my very nature, for who could choose which aspect of himself to embrace most? Kneel, Clotho, for you stand before he who has touched the heavens and made them tremble."

Clotho stared at the man for some time in silence, the shock gradually fading from his face. "Of course. I should have known that someone would have inherited the Sun's power. Foolish of me to think otherwise."

His wings flapped once, then folded back into nothingness as he raised his sword. Lightning crackled up the blade, arcing between the two halves as it rose. When it reached the tips, Clotho said, "Let's see how well you use it, then, worm."

The blade swung outward as Alex's hand mirrored it. Much to Isaac's surprise, however, nothing happened. Alex and Clotho stared at each other in confusion for a moment before Alex chuckled softly. "Of course. If two people of equal power try to create opposing differences, they would simply cancel each other out. Interesting."

"Feel free to cancel this, then," Clotho snapped, his empty hand swinging out this time. A sharp, white light burst from his palm, its luminosity all the more evident in the evening's fading sunlight.

Alex seemed ready for the attack, however, as the air shimmered before him. The bolt of light struck the barrier with a bright flash, forcing both Alex and Isaac to reflexively flinch back, but then rebounded off into the empty sky.

Clotho did not let up, bolt after bolt smashing into Alex's reflective barrier. Isaac could see the man flinching back further and further with each successive hit, obviously not affected only by the flashes of light accompanying them. Only when Alex blindly spun his fingers in a "let's go" gesture did Isaac realize the man was waiting for him to do something.

Could he rush Clotho? Doubtful. All the man needed to do was turn his hand to the side and begin attacking Isaac instead, who had no such defense against the powerful Psynergy. Glancing down, Isaac realized a convenient advantage he held, however. The boards beneath the Luminous King's feet suddenly splintered and cracked at Isaac's command, Clotho suddenly dropping several inches without warning.

The king stumbled and Alex immediately dispelled his barrier. The air around Isaac grew hot and dry as an armada of icicles formed around Alex straight from the vapor in the air. Isaac never realized a Mercury Adept could even do that; Kraden had taught them water always moved from a gas to a liquid, and then to a solid as it cooled.

The volley flew at Clotho as they formed, loosed from the invisible bows of a hundred invisible archers. Again

lightning snapped from Clotho's hand, but before it could touch the ice, they all melted into small strips of water. The lightning passed through them harmlessly, caught by Alex and diverted into the ground with a twist of his waist.

Each individual pocket of water now swirled around Clotho, gathering into a collective pool. Isaac briefly felt the pulse of Jupiter Psynergy, but in the instant before wind burst outward in a blast that would have scattered the water easily, Mercury Psynergy beat it. The water instantaneously refroze, encasing Clotho in a patchy, rough prison that reminded Isaac of the stringy cocoons the silkworms of Xian wrapped themselves in.

The frozen wrapping lacked a perfect covering, however, which Clotho quickly used to his advantage. With a short shout, Isaac felt the force of the king's voice resound and shatter the front of the ice, allowing him to dive out of the prison with no time to spare – mere moments later, great stone stalagmites burst from the ground diagonally, shattering what was left of the ice with their points. Clotho rolled as he landed on the wooden walkway, smoothly rising back to his feet and dashing at Alex, his empty hand held behind him and glowing brightly.

Isaac acted quickly, remembering the tactic from his last encounter with Clotho. Though he had no statues to place in the king's way this time, he had a surrounding just as useful. The boards beneath Clotho's feet began to snap and give way, but to Isaac's surprise, the king bounded over the breaks without so much as a moment of hesitation. Could he simply detect the presence of the Venus Psynergy as it was acting?

Before Isaac could come up with an alternative plan, however, the Anemian reached the Imilian. Clotho thrust his

hand forward as the light intensified, but Alex vanished before the energy could touch him. Clotho immediately spun back around, finding Alex behind him, but when the blue-haired man gestured downward, Clotho fell to one knee, straining to keep himself up.

Alex smirked. "I told you to kneel, my king. You should have simply done so in the beginning and made things easy."

"I kneel to no worm!" Clotho shouted, lunging forward again, his hand almost too bright to look at. Isaac watched his sword rise behind him, however, pointing straight back and crackling with yellow lightning. Before he could shout out a warning to Alex, the man disappeared and reappeared behind the king once more. The yellow bolts jumped to the man instantly, sparks crackling across his body.

Before Clotho even turned around, the yellow rolled through the remainder of the spectrum of colors, then vanished. The king turned with a smile on his face, slowly advancing towards Alex, who did not move. Isaac realized with a growing horror that he *could not* move, nor could he do anything to solve that problem; Clotho had sealed his Psynergy, as well. It would not last long, he suspected, but any time would be long enough.

Clotho reached out with his empty hand, grabbing hold of the front of Alex's clothes. "Too predictable, worm. I-"

Before he could finish, he roughly pulled his arm back as Isaac's blade came crashing down between the two men. Clotho backed away sharply as Isaac pulled his sword back, turning towards the king. "Forget about me?"

Clotho's surprise quickly turned to amusement. "You never had more than a sliver of my attention at any time, boy. You deserved less, honestly."

"Yeah?" Isaac said, speaking with a courage he did not feel. He wondered if it was a tactic he had picked up from Garet. "Let's see if I can change your mind, then."

The Valean moved forward, swinging his sword, but as he expected, Clotho's moved to meet it this time. Such a surprise could only work once, he knew. Now he simply needed to stall until Alex could free himself from Clotho's paralysis.

Part of Isaac wanted to watch the strange, double sword that Clotho wielded, the way the edges reflected the light rather distracting, but the rest knew that to do so would doom him. He fixed his gaze on the man's face and started lightly, quickly confirming that, yes, Clotho did in fact know how to use the sword. He had held an idle hope that the weapon had simply been for show, but knew that with hundreds of years of experience, the king had to have learned at some point.

As he pressed harder against the other man, however, he found it a bit surprising how he pushed him back. Though Clotho held a steady defense against Isaac, the Valean could feel a lack of ease on the king's part. His arms and body made the motions to defend him, but they moved with a very slight delay, as if his brain simply failed to respond right away...or as if his reflexes needed that instant to remember what to do.

Isaac had to fight from laughing. Clotho was *rusty.*

The knowledge soothed his fears and gave him strength. He launched everything he had into an assault, forcing the king back away from Alex. Clotho evidently realized the same thing, from the way his face slowly traded the smirk for a concentrated frown. Isaac could see a glistening layer of

sweat forming on the man's forehead, matching the one that Isaac had earned from the heat long ago.

When he took his first step up onto the palace stairs, Isaac heard a click from Clotho's blades. The sudden reappearance of the smirk stopped his advance suddenly, warning bells going off in his head. The reaction likely saved his life as the king's sword suddenly split apart, scissoring across where his neck would have been.

Isaac stumbled backwards away from the blades, trying not to let his frustration reach his lips. Of *course* that was why the blade was split; what other reason even made sense? The twin edges flashed out once more as Isaac backpedaled, his own sword moving rapidly to deflect them.

Too soon, however, he misjudged, as he knew would eventually happen. With his own blade still recovering from the momentum of his previous block, he had no weapon to parry Clotho's other sword with. Quickly reaching out to the two touching blades with his mind, they suddenly repelled each other, Isaac's own blade reversing direction and crashing into the oncoming one.

Clotho frowned slightly, but Isaac knew the tactic would be necessary. His Psynergy pulsed again and again, creating and nullifying momentum between the three swords as he needed to keep them away from his body. When he tried to use the effect to clear Clotho's guard as he struck, the man simply responded with a fierce burst of wind.

Stumbling backwards once more, Isaac windmilled his arms momentarily to avoid falling down, knowing Clotho would be on him in an instant if he did. Instead of following him, however, Clotho merely pointed one of his swords at the Valean.

Isaac's heart leaped into his throat and he instantly lunged at the other man, using his sword to repel the king's. The blade turned away, a bright bolt of purple lightning arcing off into the side of a building and throwing stone and dust into the air. There would be no taunting paralysis for himself, Isaac noticed bitterly. Clotho fought now to kill.

Jupiter Psynergy continued to gather around the man as he brought the other sword forward, forcing Isaac to repel it away as well. Each swing now preceded a blast of lightning, a sharp metallic smell filling the air, accompanied by a light haze. He could feel his own sword resonating with him, the metallic pulses drawing and repelling the other swords coming easily, but he doubted he could outlast Clotho when it came to Psynergy. Where the hell was Alex?

Much to Isaac's surprise, Clotho suddenly stepped away, peering through the gray haze at Isaac. The young man stared back, feeling his heart pounding against his chest, but otherwise still feeling fine. He suddenly found himself very thankful for all the training Garet had dragged him through in preparation for Colosso.

With a flick of the king's blade, the haze suddenly thickened into a thick smoke, turning everything more than a couple feet away into a gray wall. Clotho's outline vanished as he stepped backwards, leaving Isaac nearly blind. The smoke stung at his eyes, nose, and throat, but Isaac fought down the urge to break down into a coughing fit. The king stood just outside his visibility range, he knew, and would enter again to attack in a few moments, peering through the smoke easily with Jupiter's eye.

He closed his eyes first, letting the stinging tears fall without trying to hold them. His mind slipped into the ground, searching for footfalls or other movement while his ears did

the same without Psynergy. Only silence surrounded him, however, and he kicked himself for thinking otherwise. He had seen Ivan turn his footfalls into little more than feather drops; why would Clotho not do the same to someone who he had just blinded?

The king could not take to the air, Isaac knew, not without his wings blowing away the smoke, or at least disturbing it. If he had to remain on the ground...

Isaac spread his feet slightly, planting them more solidly on the boards, then shifted his sword into a reverse grip before plunging it through the wood and straight into the stone beneath. The brick parted, accepting the sword with what felt like a warm welcome.

The young man instantly felt his mind spread across the plaza, feeling every brick, ounce of mortar, and crack in both. He could feel the supports for the wooden walkway above the shattered stones, tied into the walkway itself. His mind reached up the walls of nearby buildings, tying itself into the wooden shingles, the clay flowerpots, the rich soil within, and even the windows themselves, much to his surprise.

He felt the nervous patter of feet at the edges of the plaza where the citizens of Anemos continued to watch the assault on their city. His invisible eyes ran up the stairs to the palace, passing by the trapped guards and racing along the steel and stone of the walls. They even penetrated the palace slightly, peering inside to the group of people watching through one window, and the lone woman watching through another.

Venus herself seemed to lean close to his ear and whisper wordlessly, *I am at your command.*

With authority like that, who needed Mars?

The ground around Isaac trembled briefly as Venus Psynergy pulsed through it, then erupted outward. The wooden boards shattered as the earth beneath exploded, great stalagmites thrusting up from the plaza like the crooked teeth of some terrible subterranean monstrosity. They pushed to the surface in a spiraling fashion around Isaac, the eye of the underground hurricane.

There. Off to one side, a foot pressed against one of the stalagmites, pushing off. Isaac turned his mind in that direction, the rocks suddenly exploding into fragments. Stones of various sizes showered the area, too many for Isaac to track individually, but the hiss of pain told him everything he needed. The ground trembled once more, then burst violently as if it were a geyser of water. He left a craterous wound in the plaza as stone and wood and king flew into the air, bouncing and rebounding off one another before landing in a heap on the ground.

A gentle Jupiter presence moved past him from behind, the breeze fluttering his hair and brushing across the back of his neck with a whisper. Slowly Isaac opened his eyes, finding the smoke dispersing in the wind as Alex walked up beside him. "I was going to apologize for leaving you alone, but it seems I wasn't quite needed."

"More the sword than me," Isaac muttered, breathing more heavily now. Though the physical combat had not bothered him much, the constant Psynergy use had begun its toll, especially within the last minute. Such wide concentration and devastating power never lasted long, even with the amplification from his blade.

A burst of Mars energy above his head caused Isaac to turn his gaze upward, finding a thin red beam passing through the deep blue abyss. It lingered for a moment, looking as if someone had cut the sky to prove it could bleed, then vanished. *The signal,* he realized. *The others are safe.*

Across the plaza stones clattered against each other and onto the remains of the walkway as Clotho pushed himself back to his feet, his swords lying forgotten on the ground. One side of his head had turned red with blood, staining his hair an odd brown color. His doublet, once one of the finest Isaac had ever seen, now sported numerous tears and rips throughout, mingled with streaks of dirt.

It was his face that Isaac could not look away from, though.

"Arrogant worms," he spat, his mouth contorting into a scowl so fierce Isaac doubted few sailors could match. His eyes burned furiously, flicking between both of them as he spoke. "I've had enough of you."

"No, Clotho, this world has had enough of you," Alex said calmly, then glanced at Isaac. "I think a change of plans is in order, Isaac. I don't think it's time for us to leave just yet."

He kept his gaze fixed on Clotho. "You mean to stay and finish him."

"I do," Alex said. "I think we've proven ourselves up to the task, and that will leave us with one less king to deal with. Better to do it now, while the opportunity presents itself."

Isaac nodded in silence. He had no delusions about letting Clotho live, though he had not expected his judgment to come this soon. If the two of them could defeat a king like this, what would happen when they added the Myrtle armor

to their lineup, or once they figured out how to use that Proxian blade? Suddenly this war seemed very winnable.

Clotho spat on the ground between them, though Isaac noticed it lacked the clear color of pure saliva. "You think you can defeat me? Me? A king of Anemos? I've evidently toyed with you worms for too long."

Alex shook his head. "No, Luminous King, you've just simply realized that toying with us was a very, very stupid idea."

The king grinned, his teeth splotched red, holding his hands out to the side as they began to glow. "Come, then, see what I am capable of! See the might of he who brings the heavens crashing down upon your heads!"

Jupiter Psynergy pulsed outward from Clotho in an invisible wave, but the sheer overwhelming presence of it still made Isaac step back. With the sun nearly set, the king's hands lit the plaza up like a bonfire, casting new shadows everywhere. Clotho threw his head back, staring up into the sky as his mouth opened, loosing a wordless shout. He clapped his hands together above his head, the light joining and launching into the air.

Isaac followed the light high into the sky where it shattered, many minute points of light moving across the sky like a pack of falling stars. Slowly the points grew larger and brighter, Alex finally muttering the same thing that occurred to Isaac: "They're returning."

Before either could take any action, however, the first bolt of light streaked down in front of them, exploding and throwing both from their feet. Isaac felt bits of wood and stone pelt his face as they flipped through the air, landing hard on a blessedly undamaged section of the boardwalk. As they quickly returned to their feet, however, another bolt struck a

short distance to their side. Though further away than the first, it still struck with enough force to disrupt their uncertain balance and send them sprawling to the ground once more.

A third bolt landed, but fortunately, it impacted some distance to their other side, obliterating the corner of a house, but giving them enough time to reach their feet once more. Alex quickly threw his hands up, and not a moment too soon, as another bolt crashed into his reflective barrier. Unlike the others, however, this one did not simply rebound back into the sky; it burst like a massive raindrop, Jupiter energy washing over the barrier and dispersing all around them.

Isaac shivered as he felt the tremendous power behind the blow, recognizing Clotho's words as truth. The force the bolt struck with shook Alex as he shielded them both, his wince making Isaac grimace sympathetically. A fifth bolt landed to their side again, the blow stumbling both, but not knocking them down. Isaac braced himself for the next strike, but it never came.

He chanced a glance to the skies, finding them devoid of stars, real or falling, then turned back to Clotho. The king had dropped his hands, breathing heavily, but had not made any movement to attack again. "It was you," Isaac said quietly. "You were the one who attacked Tolbi."

Clotho smiled, his face twisting into a cruel mockery of humor. "The City of Peace? Yes, that was my handiwork. I quite enjoyed seeing firsthand the effects, as well. I never was able to make use of our great lighthouse. My father held onto the throne longer than I would have preferred."

"You mean until your fellow kings had him executed," Alex said.

"Fellow kings?" Clotho shook his head. "They may have carried out his sentencing, but I was the one who had him arrested."

"You...what?" Isaac said, disbelieving.

"I turned him in," Clotho repeated. "My father was weak and unfit to be a king, so I had him removed. His actions would have destroyed Anemos, so I acted to save it. I had no choice."

Isaac's vision flashed briefly as something hot jumped up into his chest. "Shut up," he said slowly. "Don't you *dare* say that."

Clotho cocked his head. "What?"

"There's *always* a choice," Isaac spat, glaring at the king. He felt a fire growing inside him, wondering briefly if it was a result of the latent Mars power in his body, or simply the burning rage that had ignited. "You didn't kill your father to save anything. You killed him to further your own goals, to continue hurting others. You disgust me."

"I feel such concern over a worm's disgust," Clotho said, rolling his eyes as Jupiter Psynergy gathered to his hands once more.

"I'm proud to be a worm, you vulture!" Isaac shouted, drawing Venus Psynergy in to match the growing fury inside him. The concentration grew as he channeled it into his blade, then started forward towards Clotho. Gripping his sword tightly in both hands, Isaac spun around once, twice,

thrice. At the end of the third spin, he hurled his blade straight up into the air with a mighty swing.

The sword spun through the air, drawing all manner of objects to it as it flew. Stone ripped itself from the ground and flew towards the blade, as did the wood from the walkway. Shingles from houses flew, along with Clotho's discarded swords. Windows shattered, the fragments of glass flying to join the other objects. Anything and everything that Isaac's mind could touch became airborne, wrapping around the sword tightly. Even the ring around his neck gravitated towards the growing mass, along with the chain it rested on. The only thing pushing against the growing sword of Venus was Weyard herself, keeping it aloft as more and more materials joined it.

Clotho sneered at the massive sword, raising his shining hands towards it, but a pair of black cords suddenly snapped out, wrapping around his wrists and pulling them back. Another pair bound his feet, and yet another wrapped around his neck, pulling him to the ground. Several of the black ropes immediately leapt over him, tying him down.

Isaac glanced over at Alex to find his hands pointing at the man, Venus energy pulsing from him as well. "Light begets shadow, Lycoris," he murmured. "Foolish of you to forget that."

The Valean returned his gaze upward as the last few fragments joined his weapon, an enormous sword now outlined against the dark sky. It spun lazily, finally slowing down, until its tip pointed downward.

All at once the fury inside him turned cold. No hesitation preceded his command.

Weyard reversed her draw on the sword, push turning to pull. The blade flew down as if thrust down by the hand of Ohrmazd himself, the divine god of judgment. Despite the dark bindings, light still flew from Clotho at the incoming sword, stripping away portions of the amalgam blade as it fell, but it fizzled in the face of such massive momentum.

Isaac heard his shouts abruptly end as the great sword slammed down into him, burying itself all the way to the hilt.

The rage and adrenaline that burned inside him faded, exhaustion filling the void they left behind. He bent over and placed his hands on his knees, his vision turning white at the edges, but a hand on his shoulder made him look up once more. "We need to leave before Atropos returns," Alex said, holding out his other hand to the side. Isaac's sword crumbled, the pieces falling back to the ground as the original blade emerged from the construction, flying straight to Alex's hand.

The man turned it and held the handle out as Isaac stood up slowly, wiping his face off before taking the blade. "Thank you."

Alex shook his head. "No, the gratitude is mine. You saved me, today."

"Let's argue about this later," Isaac muttered. "After I sleep."

"Fair enough," Alex said with a grin, placing his hand back on Isaac's shoulder as both men vanished in a burst of Mercury Psynergy.

Chapter 16: A Child's Conviction

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 16 – A Child's Conviction

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Ivan sat atop Jupiter's aerie, the lighthouse's beacon steadily pulsing at his back. He felt the constant, gentle surge as it pushed its power out over Weyard, spreading Jupiter's influence to the furthest reaches of Gaia Falls, and even beyond. The power made him shiver frequently as it rippled past him, enough energy to cover all of Atteka in lightning storms, yet sliding past him with barely a whisper.

The lighthouse's shadow fell over the forest to the east, stretching far into the mountains beyond. Ivan glanced in the opposite direction, gazing out at Sol as the great god slowly slipped beneath Weyard's edge. The ocean turned to fire near his departure, brilliant hues of red and orange and yellow that autumn's end dreamed of matching.

He turned his eyes upward to the deep blue sky, quickly darkening as it stretched away from the horizon. No stars had yet emerged from the darkness above, though he knew they simply waited patiently for the sun's departure. Soon they would spread across the heavens, a handful of glittering sand cast out by the gods for the fascination of mortals.

Sol's retreat thickened the shadows over the land as his aura began to fade, following its owner beneath the seas. From his seat atop the aerie, Ivan watched as darkness filled in the gaps between trees below, turning the forest into a

labyrinth of wood, one that could ensnare wanderers for weeks on end. Darkness spilled out from the cracks and crevasses of the mountains, life some enormous maw stretching wide to swallow what little light remained. Even the empty plains grew dull, their colors slowly fading to the gray that would in turn give way to black.

Such darkness was abnormal, he knew. His gaze turned skyward once more, searching for the loose handful of stars that should have emerged from their slumber, yet the sky remained empty. Luna alone hung in the center of the sky, full and round, yet her presence gave no light to her child. From its normal, remote hideaways, the thick dark stretched out, devouring as much of Weyard as it could before Sol returned.

Like a black wave the shadows washed over the land, though this wave did not recede. The darkness continued to spread, turning everything Ivan could see the black of the sky above, even the rolling ocean. Soon nothing remained beneath him; even the horizon itself had vanished, melding land, sea, and sky together into one endless mass of shadow, Luna peering down from above like a terrible eye.

He could see the shadows reaching up the lighthouse, slowly climbing the bricks and devouring them in the same manner. He moved backwards, towards the beacon, knowing that it would protect him, that it would keep the darkness at bay in place of Luna's light.

When he turned around, however, he found the beacon gone, the well standing empty. He could do nothing more than stare at it in silence as the black tendrils crept over the aerie's edge, reaching out to smother everything in darkness.

Jenna frowned.

Kraden's face mirrored hers.

The old man had a convincing frown, one that rivaled her own, accompanied by a fiercely sturdy stare. The girl had practiced her art for years, capable of wearing down just about anyone who chose to test his will against hers, but Kraden possessed a stubborn determination that far outstripped hers. When she stared into his eyes, she found the immovable essence of time staring back, that which bent for no man.

Jenna felt her own determination slipping, She felt her eyes trying to slide from his, her mind wandering to the great window's map behind him, or to his bookshelves that lined the study's walls. Even her body betrayed her, an itch on her neck requiring the constant, conscious decision to keep her hands firmly on the desk, planted where she had slammed them down. She grudgingly recognized that the man would merely defeat her again, as he always did. Even Felix would lose to her on occasion, but Kraden never lost. When he set his mind on something, nothing could sway him from it.

So she stuck out her tongue and blew raspberries at him. "Fine, then. Keep your secrets."

Kraden rolled his eyes as the girl folded her arms across her chest. "You'll find out soon enough. There's no reason to go through everything multiple times. Just wait until everyone is awake."

The Valean scoffed as she spun around, striding from the room with as much haughty pride as she could muster. Only once the door had closed behind her did she drop her

shoulders and attitude, looking around the empty hallway with a bored expression.

Three days. She had been stuck here for three days, though at least Felix let her outside the palace this time. She wanted more, though. She wanted to take their momentum and use it, place the Anemoi on the defensive for once. She had not even wanted to leave Contigo in the first place. The girl had waited at Ivan's house for what seemed like hours that evening, her eyes never leaving the direction of Anemos. In the growing dark, she had not seen the minute speck approaching until it cleared the hill in a warp, Alex and Isaac winking into existence before her, relatively unharmed. Their victory ignited the hope inside her; if the two of them could defeat a king so soundly, why didn't they just rush the palace to take out the other two?

Felix struck down her proposal immediately, of course, though much to her surprise, most of the others did as well, including Isaac. "That was Clotho's first real fight," he said, shaking his head. "He was a kid when Anemos left. He was powerful, really powerful, but didn't have any actual experience. He was arrogant, and overestimated us."

"You're welcome," Sheba said, looking at her fingernails.

Though she acknowledged they had far better points than her, the realization did nothing to alleviate the boredom over the next few days. They had all celebrated Sheba's return, of course, and she filled them in on everything that had happened there, but that only occupied her for a day.

Several of the boys had visited Yallam yesterday, to check on the status of Garet's armor, the first time any of them had left Tolbi since returning. She fought desperately to go, but, again, Felix intervened, sending Isaac, Garet, and Ivan

instead; the former two for the experience in short-term combat armor they had gained in Colosso, vice the less encumbering light armor they usually wore, and the last for his ability to appraise the status of just about everything. Not that they doubted Sunshine, of course, but once the man started work on something, he became remarkably withdrawn, usually responding to questions with grunts. The three figured that, between them, they could probably determine how much longer the armor would take.

It seemed simple. They had left in the morning, and returned in the late evening, citing another mandatory dinner from the innkeepers. When they returned, though, their eyes were alight with excitement, yet no armor to accompany it. Jenna had waited up for their return, but Felix had told her to go to bed, as the others had, that they would discuss everything together in the morning. When she pointed out that *he* was staying up to hear the news, he simply reminded her that he preferred to sleep on plans and shut the door in her face.

She had blown raspberries at him, too.

Jenna frowned to herself. Isaac was still asleep, although she doubted he would stay like that for long; others, while not as impatient as her, wanted the news as well. She could probably afford to waste some time loitering. She briefly considered making a return to the roof, but dismissed the idea, not wanting to get blamed for any loud noises.

For the past few days, every so often, they would hear some resounding boom from Kraden's basement, courtesy of the toys they had brought back from Anemos. Mia had delivered a strange rod that stored Psynergy, and when a small switch was pulled, launched it in the direction the rod pointed.

Kraden's alchemists had gone crazy with the possibilities, immediately ferreting it downstairs.

They tried to do the same with Sheba's tuning fork, which she occasionally spoke to someone through, but the girl gave them an hour with it before she demanded it back. The alchemists resisted, even when she threatened to bring Kraden, but finally relented when the girl threatened to bring Jenna.

Jenna had greatly enjoyed the look on Brennan's face when the others forced him to hand it back over. He had not been in Tolbi during Jenna's first trip to the lab. The others had. The others remembered.

After a long conversation with Kraden, Sheba finally agreed to give it to them for longer, recognizing the usefulness such a device could bring. Jenna still liked to think of it as a victory, though.

She glanced around herself suddenly, finding herself underground. Had she started towards the lab while thinking about it? No, she realized. This was the passage to the colosseum, not to the lab. Shrugging, she continued along the path, her mind having no better plan than her feet.

As she stepped out into the arena stands, the silence pulled the breath from her lungs. She had never been in the colosseum while it was empty, but even so, she knew that more than simple absence maintained the silence.

In several places around the arena, she could see the mangled remains of stone and wood where stands once sat, covered in their red cloth. One of the walls had shattered, stone spilling down into the arena floor, the center of which had hardened again. She could see the shattered remnants

of the prison Alex had placed her in, as well as the imprint Ivan had made when Alex forced the boy into the mud.

The most notable change, however, was the black crater on the arena floor. The outer ring rose up nearly two feet from the ground, shimmering lightly in the morning sun that peaked through the slats in the eastern wall. The sparkles made the superheated glass seem beautiful, a sculpture frozen in an instant of time, but the knowledge of its origin made Jenna shiver.

"The air is still here."

Jenna spun around at the voice, finding Piers in the stands behind her. Had he been there all along? "Don't do that, Piers."

"Sorry," the man said quietly, stepping down. "It's just... It feels almost rude to speak here. It reminds me of a graveyard."

The girl remained silent for a moment as Piers stepped beside her, looking out over the damaged colosseum. A pair of birds fluttered onto the northern wall, looking down at them for a moment in the same silence, then continued on their way. "This is your first time seeing it, isn't it?"

He nodded slowly. Jenna could not think of a time the man did anything quickly, outside of situations that called for urgency. "I haven't been back to Tolbi since it happened. When I was talking to Mia yesterday, she suggested I come see it for myself. Give me a more concrete motivation to stop them." A small smile crept onto his face. "I don't think she knows me as well as she thinks."

"You tend not to let things out much," Jenna noted. "It took a long time before you opened up to us. She probably mistook

your *stoic aloofness* as a lack of concern."

Piers turned to her, raising an eyebrow. *"Stoic aloofness?"*

She placed her hands on her hips. "I can call you a shade less shy than Ivan, if you prefer. I *think* he took longer to start talking to me."

"You'll forgive my introversion, I hope," he said with a smile. "I tend to prefer my thoughts to conversation most of the time."

"That's why you were out here, huh?" Jenna asked, but turned away. She needed no response to the question. "I think I needed some of the same."

She felt him move away. "I'll leave you to that, then."

"Wait, hold on!" she said, looking over at him and shaking her head. "That came out wrong. I just meant I needed to think about things too. I'd rather have someone to talk it over with, though. Plus... You're good for talking about this kind of thing."

Piers waited patiently for her to continue, but she failed to find the appropriate words to start. He seemed to notice this, however, moving to the edge of the arena and looking out over it once more. "There's a power here. It lingers in the air, even now. Can you feel it?"

She shook her head silently.

"It's subtle, quiet," he continued softly. "You hear it in the silence, in the deep respect and fear held for this arena. It runs deep, far deeper than Psynergy. Almost on a purely spiritual level." He met Jenna's eyes, his face carefully comported in the same calmness that she found so common

on him. "Death, Jenna. Death lingers in this arena, and not just from Clotho's attack. Blood is soaked deeply into these stones."

Jenna nodded. "Kraden told us that long ago, before he was born, before Babi was even born, they had real fights in the colosseum. Not like now, with the training blades, but ones to the death."

"I've heard stories," Piers said, turning back to the sand below. "In the decades that followed Alchemy's seal, as Psynergy began to fade from the world, Adepts used their lingering power to rule, and often in unpleasant fashions. I imagine non-Adepts were pitted against each other here for amusement."

"You can feel it?" Jenna asked.

"Yes." He sighed softly, looking around once more and closing his eyes. "It's not something I've noticed before visiting Prox for the first time. While we were in the town, I could feel something slightly...off in places. I didn't make the connection until much later, after revisiting some places and paying attention to the feeling, but it was of a concentration of death. Healer's clinics were the most frequent disturbances, but occasionally I would find a random one, likely from an event forgotten to the world."

Jenna closed her eyes, trying to empty her mind. She felt the warmth of coals fill the darkness, her Psynergy automatically reaching out to her, but she gently pushed it away as well. It did not hold the answer she sought. One by one, she shut off her senses, knowing none of them would be useful in detecting the disturbance Piers spoke of.

In the end she was left with simply her breathing as utter blackness filled in her world, feeling her chest slowly expand

and contract. Her mind frequently tried to slip to some other sensation, but she tethered it firmly to her breathing, counting the breaths in the back of her head.

After a few moments of nothing, however, she felt the mental leash grow taut once more, then finally tear. Colorful lights began to dance along the backs of her eyelids as she became aware of the sunlight's warmth, the gentle rustling of sand across the stone, the distant shouts of merchants from the city beyond. Sighing, she abandoned her efforts and opened her eyes. "I'm sorry, I can't feel anything."

He shook his own head. "Don't be disappointed. I went a long time without ever noticing. I can't even really describe how it feels normally, either; it just *is.*"

They stood together in silence as Jenna simply absorbed it. Though she could not feel what Piers had, the arena still filled her with a sense of unease. The glass crater gave her the impression of an eye looking out from the arena's floor, never blinking. Simply the knowledge of its history unsettled her; she needed no additional sensations for that.

"You said earlier you had something you wanted to talk about?" Piers said after a few minutes, shifting slightly to the side to move his eyes out of a ray of light.

"No, not here," Jenna said, shaking her head, tearing her eyes away from the crater. "This isn't a good place for it. Let's head back, we can talk about it later. It's not that important."

By the time Piers opened the door to Kraden's study, Jenna found nine pairs of eyes instantly look up at them. The two slid in the room without a word, shutting the door behind them.

"Jenna. Glad you could join us," Kraden said dryly, his eyes twinkling as he looked at her.

She felt her face turn red and mumbled an apology that she doubted anyone could hear, shuffling over to stand beside Sheba. The other girl nudged her gently with an elbow, grinning wide, but said nothing.

Kraden, standing in the center of the study, turned back towards his desk and gestured at the three boys standing in front of it. Jenna could not help but giggle mentally at Ivan; since getting back to Tolbi, he had insisted on keeping Dullahan's blade slung across his back. While such a weapon looked normal on Isaac and Garet, the sword dwarfed the boy's small frame. He had even forgone his normal sword belt, at least while around the palace.

Isaac and Garet glanced at each other briefly, the latter shrugging, then looking around. "Okay. So anyway, the armor's about half done," Garet said, crossing his arms. "Definitely be done within a week. Sunshine says it's difficult to work, but the guy's completely fascinated by it. He's not gonna stop till it's done."

"Do we have any plans on implementing it?" Alex asked. "Aside from 'don and go', of course."

Isaac shrugged. "Not anything big, yet. They don't realize we have it, though, which could be a big advantage. Clotho knew his way around a sword, but it was obvious he was out of practice. If we're lucky, the others will focus on Psynergy instead of physical training."

"We might consider using it as the end result of a trap," Piers said, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "If we physically exhaust the kings first, then engage with the Myrtle, they may be too fatigued for a sword fight. Or we could use their

overconfidence against them, goad them into a fight somewhere where their Psynergy has a benefit, such as Jupiter Lighthouse, since their perceived advantage will be nullified."

"Keep the idea in mind, and when it comes time to use it, we'll talk about it again," Felix said, then twirled his fingers at the speakers.

Garet frowned, but continued. "We've got something else to work towards, too. We've all seen blondie's sword there," he said, jerking his thumb at Isaac, "and how it amplifies his Psynergy. Turns out that's not all it does. Shorty here," he jerked a thumb in the other direction, "has got a sword that lets the holder use Jupiter Psynergy, even if the holder isn't a Jupiter Adept."

"It might just be lightning," Ivan said, frowning at Garet's name for him.

The young man shrugged. "Not important. These swords, though, are pretty much identical, other than shape, and element. One for Venus, one for Jupiter. When we talked about them with Sunshine, he got a crazy idea in his head: what happens if you forge a new sword from them both?"

A brief silence settled across the room as Jenna noticed everyone, bar Felix and Kraden, pondering that thought. Alex spoke first. "If done carefully, the new sword could theoretically control *both* elements."

Garet nodded. "Yep. Sunshine thinks the same thing. But he's crazy. He's thinking big. Why do it with just these two?" He paused for dramatic effect, then said, "Why not find one for Mars and Mercury, then get a sword that controls *everything?"*

Sheba let out a low whistle. "That'd be pretty nice. How well can it control things? Like..." She trailed off, glancing at Alex, but Jenna understood.

Isaac did too. "Not that much. It makes things much easier for your own element, but others are still pretty difficult. I tried Ivan's out earlier, and even after I got the hang of how Jupiter Psynergy works, it was still tough. Mine, though, basically expands everything I can do. Range, ease, complexity, everything."

"Is it worth combining them, though?" Jenna asked, then glanced around. "Instead of one awesome sword, we'd have four pretty cool swords."

Felix shook his head. "Not much use. Isaac's made good use of the Venus blade, and Garet could probably use a Mars one to good effect, but we don't have anyone to use the Jupiter blade, and while Piers *could* use a Mercury sword, he's the only one comfortable with the Trident, which is still fairly powerful, even when facing the Anemoi."

Isaac jerked his thumb at Felix. "We already figured he'd get it, anyway. I've got Prox's sword, once I figure out how it works, and Garet's getting the armor. It works out better."

"Amassing quite the arsenal, aren't we?" Hama murmured. "Before we get ahead of ourselves, though, where do we plan on finding two more of these swords? I've never even heard of such blades before."

"They seem to have been relics of ancient civilizations, perhaps from a time when such weapons were commonplace," Kraden said, gesturing to Isaac. "That was found deep in Venus Lighthouse, which has been sealed for many generations, and is the only remaining remnant of the vanished Venus Clan. Ivan's was handed to him from the

spirit of an ancient King of the Jupiter Clan. It stands to reason the other two clans would have created these blades, as well, and if we're lucky, they might still hold them."

Jenna's eyes drifted back to the sword poking over Isaac's shoulder as Kraden's point became clear. "Could that one be the Mars blade, then?" she said, pointing at it.

Isaac and Garet shook their heads together. "We already checked it," Isaac said. "There's something there, something powerful, but it doesn't have the same feel as the other two."

"So we need to check with Prox again," Piers said, sighing. "Well, Felix, you should have a much easier time with that than we did."

Much to Jenna's surprise, her brother glanced briefly at Piers, then dropped his eyes to the ground, remaining silent. She felt her mouth fall open at the scene, and she noticed most of the others expressing similar surprise. "What the... Felix, what was *that?"*

He muttered something quietly.

"What?" she asked, cupping a hand around her ear.

"I said I can't go," he said, still barely audible.

Jenna blinked once, glancing over at Piers, who seemed similarly surprised. Before either could say anything more, however, Sheba spoke up. "He promised to take me to Lalivero." As they all glanced over at her, the girl swallowed, turning pink, then continued. "I... I need to see my family right now. Felix promised that he would bring me there before we got back into the thick of things."

The silence that followed her words only served to make Sheba's face brighter and brighter, and though Jenna found her embarrassment hilarious, she knew she could not simply sit back and watch her friend suffer. "That's fine, I'll take his place," she said, clapping Piers on the shoulder. "We'll go together. Minus Isaac. It'll probably go much smoother."

"I would actually like to come as well," Hama said. "Fortune sent me to find the Myrtle last time, which worked out for the better, but I would like to see the northern wilds, too."

"You're not missing much," Isaac murmured, but everyone ignored the comment, amusing Jenna to no end.

"I'll be headed to Imil, then," Mia said, then glanced at Alex. "We will, rather. My father has a large store of things he collected from the world, and from the lighthouse, as well. We can start there."

Jenna glanced over at Ivan, expecting the boy to protest, or to join the Imil group, but when he spoke, it was not about concern for Mia's safety. "Should we be splitting up so much, though? One of the kings might be dead, but the other two will surely be out for us now."

"Don't worry, they're still sitting at home," Sheba said. "I've been talking with one of Atropos' daughters, and she promised to let me know if one of them left the city. They've got the tool down in the lab right now, so just check in real quick now and then. She knows you guys might be using it, too."

Alex frowned. "Can she be trusted?"

Sheba nodded. "She doesn't agree with the kings, and she's a friend. I haven't told her where we are, though. She's specifically said she doesn't want any details like that."

"Don't worry, Prince Sheba's got us covered," Garet said with a wide grin.

"For the gods' sakes, Garet, I told you, the royal titles are *gender-neutral!"*

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The door shuddered as Mia's foot slammed into it, tiny specks of dust ballooning into the air. She watched them through the lantern's light, then handed it to Alex, eying the side of the door. She knew it always tended to stick after being shut, and it had not been touched in years. She could feel the permafrost settling in around the frame, bowing it slightly, but thawing it would only cause stability problems.

So she stepped back, then lashed out with her boot again, striking it solidly next to the handle. The whole frame rumbled this time, causing more dust to drift down from the stone ceiling. She had no fear of the chamber collapsing; the sanctum above had been built to last, and she had seen firsthand just how reliable Imil's frozen soil could be.

"Are you sure you don't want me-" Alex began, but Mia shook her head sharply.

"No," she said, cutting him off. "This is my sanctum, my door, and my responsibility. I'm fine." Taking a deep breath, she kicked the door once again.

This time the frame relinquished its deathgrip on the door, allowing it to swing open and crash into the opposite side. Mia winced, hoping there had been nothing fragile behind it, took the lantern back from Alex, and stepped inside the dark storeroom, holding it aloft.

It seemed a lot smaller than she remembered it, though to be fair, she had not been in the room for nearly ten years. Not since her father had passed away. She could not recall him ever opening the door to remove anything, only to put something new inside. Nothing had ever left the room besides him, as far as she knew.

"Can you see in here?" she asked.

Another light flickered across the darkness from behind her as Alex lit his own lantern. "Hah. No, but I *can* see why your father never let me in here. Can you feel it?"

She turned around, finding him standing just inside the doorway, eyes closed. "Feel what?"

The man did not answer at first, taking a long breath through his nose. "This room is full of Alchemy. So many things here are resonating with Psynergy, thrumming with power. It's...astounding."

Mia quieted her mind, reaching out with it instead. As soon as she moved her attention towards it, she immediately picked up on the sensation Alex spoke of. All around her, she could *feel* things. She pushed her mind towards them, trying to feel them out as if they were items hidden beneath a cloth, but found herself unable. They evaded description or identification, simply continuing to exist on the edges of her senses. She thought of a creature, sitting silently underwater, only visible by the trail of bubbles it released to the surface.

"You're right," she murmured, then shook her head, glancing around. She hoped for the glimmer of firelight on steel, and while she received no such sign, she spotted her target anyway. "Here. Over here."

She stepped towards a table along the far wall, various weapons all laid out on it, covered in varying layers of dust. Glancing down at the edge, she saw four small disturbances in the thicker dust, though they had been covered with a layer of their own to hide them. She reached out slowly, laying her fingers into the imprints, finding them slightly wider and larger than her own.

Pulling her hand back, she moved her eyes across the table. She could see several swords and daggers, varying in their lengths, as well as a few axes, and even the head of a halberd, removed from the staff that once held it. Before she could examine any of them in length, though, her eyes fell on the piece of paper lying in the center of the table, folded and resting across a pair of sword sheaths. The only marking on the outside was her name, written in the small, neat handwriting of her father.

Again she thrust her lantern into Alex's hand as he approached, turning back to the table and picking up the paper without a word. She hesitated briefly, gingerly touching the name on the paper, as if she would wipe it away should it be an illusion. She felt Alex become still beside her, holding his lantern up for light, so she opened it. The same handwriting filled the inside.

Mia,

If you're reading this, then I've already joined your mother at the feet of Coatlicue (and far earlier than I would have liked), because you're too well-behaved to sneak in here otherwise.

I don't know what brought you to this room. I hope it's nothing more than a simple curiosity about the things I've

found. If so, I beg you: leave now, shut the door, speak of it to no one, and open it only to lock something inside.

The items in this room are dangerous, each and every one. They are not toys, nor ordinary items, no matter how much they might seem it. I've felt the power hidden within each one, and I'm sure that if you try, you can too. I'm no longer in any position to tell you what to do, so I must hope that I've raised you to make the proper choices on your own. I highly recommend treating this room in the same way I have: as a prison.

I cannot possibly predict all the things you might see or experience in your life, though I hope they are varied, and good. If you feel the need to remove anything from this room, all I ask is that you give it the consideration it warrants, and that you treat it with the proper respect. Do not take anything here lightly.

I apologize for not telling you these things in person, but our lives are not always meant to be long. Your mother was a vibrant soul, far too bright for Weyard to handle her for long. If you're reading this, then evidently, she passed on too much of her radiance to me, and my candle has burned up.

Know that I will always love you, Mia, no matter what. I always hope I get to see you grow into a beautiful woman, but even if I don't, I can imagine it well enough. Regardless of where life brings you, I'm sure you will handle it as best you can - and that's all any father can ask for.

I love you, my angel.

Always.

Mia continued to stare at the letter for a long while in silence. She read through it again, slowly, savoring every

word her father wrote, her eyes tracing out the crisp flow of his letters, hearing the words in his voice. She found the mention of her mother odd, considering how little he ever spoke of her. After a moment, however, she realized he had no reason to speak about her. Mia had never known her, the woman having died in childbirth, though she knew her father treasured her. The few times she entered his words for more than a short mention, he ended the conversation with wet eyes and a morose expression.

After her fourth time through the letter, she gently folded it back up, sliding it into her thick robes for safekeeping, then refocused on the table in front of her.

"Mia?" Alex asked quietly. "Are you alright?"

"Nothing that can't wait until later," she said firmly, keeping the thoughts of her father at bay. "We have work to do."

He studied her in silence for a moment, then nodded, turning to the table as well. He handed Mia's lantern back to her, then reached out over the weapons. His hand hovered above the various sheaths for a few seconds, then moved on to the next without a word. Only once he had paused at each one did he reach back and pull one sword from the table.

"Will that work?" Mia asked.

Alex nodded. "Both this and that dagger," he gestured with the pommel, "have an inherent Mercury signature. I would think this to be more useful in our case, however."

Mia nodded in reply, looking back at the table again. She held out her hand to the dagger Alex had indicated, feeling the faint sense of Mercury emanating from within. Gently laying her fingers onto the handle, she could feel the

dormant energy inside, rather different from an alchemy tool. Instead of the near-silent whispering in her mind, asking for use, she felt another presence entirely, as if something lived within the blade. It stood still and unmoving, poised for her command, its very presence giving the weapon weight.

She picked the dagger up gingerly, turning it over in her hand once, then replaced it. Her eyes moved to the next weapon, her hand following them to the long, slightly curved blade. The sheath shone red in the firelight, and within seconds she could feel the Mars energy within the blade.

"Alex, what about this?" she asked, shifting her hand to pick it up. Without warning, a manacle of ice suddenly formed around her wrist, jerking both her hand and arm up and away from the table, forcing her onto the balls of her feet.

Alex appeared by her side a moment later, his eyes wide. He placed a hand on her arm and the ice vanished, allowing him to guide it back down gently. "Don't touch it," he breathed, his gaze flickering to the sword. "Not with your bare hands. Preferably not ever."

Mia drew her hand to her chest, unconsciously clenching and unclenching it. "What is it? Can we not use it?"

"We might be able to," he said, then shook his head. "I will not risk it, though. I've seen blades such as that before, tainted with blood and hate. Those who hold them always wind up slain in horrifying ways, and I would not count on any smith short of Daedalus himself to remove such a stain."

The woman glanced back at the unassuming blade, then turned her back on the table. "We have what we need. Let's leave."

Alex frowned, looking to the side. "We do, I agree...but despite the danger some of these might hold, I think we should at least look through. There may well be useful items here."

"At what cost, though?" Mia asked. "If you are right, taking that sword might have destined me to an early death."

The man patted the other sword, now slid through his belt. "But this one is merely a danger in the wrong hands. I believe many of these items are the same: held here to prevent them falling into unsavory hands, for fear of the damage they might cause. Now, though, our hands need as much damage as we can find."

Mia frowned, but said, "Alright. Don't touch anything without being sure of it, though."

Alex turned to her with a smile, opening his mouth for what she suspected was a sarcastic remark. When he saw her expression, however, the smile fell, and he nodded. "Of course."

She followed him as he explored the small storeroom, their pair of lanterns filling it with light. The table to their left held more weapons, though a few assorted pieces of armor sat along the edges as well. Mia could see a pair of boots, a pair of greaves, and a lonely gauntlet. She peered underneath the table, wondering if the other had fallen, but found nothing. Alex passed his hand over everything, but made no comment about them, nor about the suit of armor resting in the corner.

A series of shelves stood against the other wall, holding a variety of random items. Mia could see jewelry, books, a folded piece of cloth, and even what appeared to be the

skull of some horned animal. All lay under the same coat of dust the weapons had, muting the colors completely.

Alex started at the top, running his hand over the jewelry in a quick pass, then returning for a more thorough inspection. As he cleared some pieces, he picked them up, merely holding some, while applying a small amount of Psynergy to others. The first few did nothing, but on the fourth ring, a gray cloud sprayed out. Mia immediately held her breath, fearing the worst, but Alex waved his hand and the mist dissipated. "Nothing to worry about," he said with a smile, placing it back on the shelf.

He passed over the next couple, then tried another ring. A white light suddenly filled the chamber as he did, searing Mia's eyes. She flinched back, threw up her hand reflexively, and yelped more from surprise than pain. The light immediately faded, though the afterimage lingered on in the now-dim lighting.

"I apologize," Alex said, rubbing his own eyes with the hand that still held the ring. "I hadn't quite expected that either." He blinked a few times, then looked down at the ring thoughtfully. After a moment of consideration, he held it out to Mia.

She glanced at the ring, then at Alex, one eyebrow arching sharply.

The corner of his mouth tweaked up into a small smirk. "I would never dream of doing such a thing in a basement, Mia."

Her own smirk mirrored his as she took the ring. "No, I suppose you value style too much for that." She slid the ring onto her finger, once again feeling the faint whisper of an alchemy tool. She held it low, placing her body between it

and Alex, and fed it Psynergy, looking up before she did. Another brilliant flash of light filled the storeroom, quickly stifled as Mia wrapped her hand around the ring's jewel. The gaps between her fingers shown a brilliant red as the light tried to squeeze out, making the woman feel as if she were holding the sun itself.

She cut out the light, a bit disappointed that she could not control the intensity of the illumination, but still recognized its usefulness. Moving her hand next to the lantern, she found the ring held not a single gem, but three: one red, one blue, and one green, fit together into an oval and nestled atop a silver band.

A sharp intake of breath made her look up once more. Alex's hand had hesitated over the cloth on the shelf, though his eyes were fixed upon one of the books near it. His hand shifted to it, then pulled back slightly, as if he belatedly remembered his promise to Mia. He paused there for a moment, then pulled the book from the shelf, setting his lantern down to turn it over in his hands.

Mia held her own lantern up, peering at the book as well. The cover was a deeper black than any she had ever seen. It surpassed that of the night sky, so dark that she could probably have picked it out on a moonless, starless night. Thin, vivid red lines, their vibrancy unmarred by the layers of dust, etched out a series of letters in a language Mia had never seen. "What is it?" she asked.

Alex brushed one hand across the cover gently, his fingers tracing out a few of the letters. "This is... It holds the secrets of a tribe that lives in the heart of Gondowan. I thought it nothing more than a myth, but this... I can feel it. This is more than just a book. This is the *Tomegathericon.*"

She glanced at the book again, but saw nothing special about it, nor could she remember ever hearing about it. "What sort of secrets are supposed to be in it?"

He turned to look at her, firelight flickering in the reflection of his eyes. "Secrets about the boundaries between life and death."

A chill ran down Mia's back, settling into her lower back and reaching into her stomach with cold fingers. "Alex... Is this about..."

"Yes," he said immediately, glancing down at the book again. "This book might tell me how to bring her back, even without the rest of the Golden Sun." He ran his hand across the cover again, then slid the book under his arm and picked the lantern up once more. "Of course, that is simply my personal interest in the book. There are said to be secrets of Psynergy in here, unknown to modern times, utilized only by the tribe."

Mia looked at him skeptically. "And you think they might be of use?"

Alex shrugged. "I've heard few details beyond that, but given the range of techniques we have seen Psynergy capable of, I am certainly willing to find more."

She frowned, wanting to find a flaw in that logic, but could not. "Do you... Do you really think that Marie *should* be brought back?"

"She was robbed of her life," he said firmly. "If you or I were to die now, it would be tragic, to be sure. But what right did Charon have to take her? She had not lived in this world." Mia could hear his voice shift slightly, sounding slightly sullen. "While few can claim to fully experience life, she

never had the chance to even partially experience it. Five years is nothing, Mia. *Nothing."*

"I'm not saying it was fair," she said gently, laying her open hand on his arm. "But you know as well as I do that death never is. We devoted our lives to the respect of that barrier, to trying to stave it off for as long as possible, but some things always fall out of our control."

"And sometimes, just sometimes, things fall back into it," he whispered.

Mia stood silently for a few minutes with him. To bring the dead back to life... It just seemed wrong to her. She held no delusions that the gods had taken Marie for some purpose; she found such an idea silly. People died all the time, and as unfortunate as it was, in times of sickness, children were some of the first to succumb.

Perhaps it was simply her perspective. She had no siblings to lose as a child, her mother had died without her ever knowing, and her father died over the better course of a year, long enough for her to grow accustomed to the idea. Death had always been part of her apprenticeship, too. Her father imparted on them both early on that not everyone could be saved. It had taken time to adjust to that line of thinking, of course, to desensitize herself to the loss of someone she knew, but it came.

She always thought it had come for Alex, as well. She knew he carried the pain of the girl's death with him, of course, as did she, but as a memory, not a motive. Had her death simply struck past the barrier they had built up? Had it come too early for him to properly deal with?

She had no idea. Alex guarded his inner thoughts too well for her to make any strong guesses. She knew well his

incredible strength of determination, however. He had shaped the world itself for his sister, at least in part. Could she really talk him out of something like that?

"Come on," she said at last. "Let's go. I don't think there's anything else here for us."

Alex glanced around the room one last time, then nodded. "I agree."

As she locked the door, dropping the key back into one of her pockets, Alex moved towards the stairs, looking back down at the book. The question she should be asking herself was not *if* she could, she realized, but *how.*

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It did not snow in Lalivero. According to Kraden, the last snowfall in the area had been during the long, cold winter that preceded the Great Flood. The world had been covered in catastrophes in that time; earthquakes tore land and threw it into the sea, volcanoes turned islands into piles of smoke and ash, countless coastal villages vanished in the wake of hurricanes, and droughts revealed lake beds so deep they had never been touched by man.

Kraden theorized the events had resembled the rumbling of one's stomach, that Weyard had been trying to shift its limited nourishment around to make it last longer. Had the removal of the elemental stars from Mt. Aleph's sanctum not triggered another such wave of worldwide disasters, Kraden speculated they would have occurred regardless, though perhaps a few years later.

The severe upheaval had caused strange weather patterns across the world, from twisters touching down in eastern Angara, to blizzards in central Gondowan. Suhalla had

received nearly a foot of snow, something that few of the inhabitants had ever heard of, much less seen. Many of them saw it as a sign of the apocalypse, according to writings from the period, pulling the various small farming communities together for their last days.

The world had not ended, of course, but the close-knit group that bonded remained together regardless, forming the town of Lalivero. For a few years, they enjoyed a great fertility of the receding marshland, courtesy of the heavy floodwaters, but after a few decades, the land returned to its mostly barren state. The Laliverans prayed for snow once more, desperate for another flood to follow in its eventual spring.

Felix sympathized with them, though for entirely different reasons.

He pulled at the neck of his shirt, fanning himself with it, wondering in what way Weyard considered this winter. He had stowed his leather armor in his bag before leaving, knowing it would likely be unnecessary, but even so, he felt the heat pressing in all around him. It did not merely come from the sun; broad-rimmed hats helped deal with that significantly. This heat seemed to come from the ground around him, as well, drifting lazily up from the cracks in the baked clay like water gone wrong.

In all of his previous visits, earlier this year and the one before, he had found the town hot, but not unbearable, glad for the seasonal timing. For whatever reason, though, winter had decided to go on vacation, bringing along a burning glimpse of late spring. When Sheba mentioned it became even hotter in the summer, Felix forcibly prevented himself from trying to imagine such a hellish heat.

For her part, the girl appeared to be handling it much better, though Felix supposed that if he had grown up in such an environment, he would as well. She had worn light, loose clothing as well, and though a thin sheen of sweat coated her forehead, she seemed to pay no attention to it. He noticed she did not move quickly towards the town walls, despite her obvious eagerness, and realized she was likely moving slow to compensate for the heat.

He focused on his own movements, trying to minimize them and the effort he used, but felt no real difference in either his movement or the heat, so he focused his attention on his surroundings instead.

His first trip to Lalivero had been disastrous. Not only accompanying the people who merely blasted through the town's minor defenses, but with their revered child in tow, he often wondered whether the Valeans or Laliverans would hate him for longer. Sheba had apparently convinced her mother, at least, that he had no ill intentions, but after his most recent visit, he wondered whether that protection would stand...or if they would allow her to leave again.

Not that they could stop her, of course. He glanced over at the girl again, though she seemed to be walking in an oblivious calm, enjoying the simple pleasure of being home once more. Beneath her delight, however, he felt her resolve. If anyone tried to stop her from leaving, she would simply teleport out of the city.

Assuming she decided against a display of Psynergy to threaten her way out, or convince them of her safety. She *had* been picking up a terrifying number of habits from his sister.

As they approached the town's gate, Felix watched the guards' expressions shift from light interest to sudden joy to silent horror in one fluid motion. One turned towards the town and shouted something, and in less than a minute, two more men and a woman appeared in the gate, all brandishing weapons.

"Great," he muttered, suddenly regretting he had worn his sword. Without his armor, it stood out significantly more, and it would have been just as easily accessible strapped to his bag. After a moment's consideration, however, the regret vanished. He would hand his coins to Charon personally before he allowed himself the chance to be caught off-guard again, unable to defend Sheba.

He felt Sheba bristle beside him, an irritated scoff coming from her throat. Before he could say anything, she strode out in front of him, her jaw set. Once they had reached a comfortable speaking distance, she stopped, eying the five people now pointing weapons in their direction, all deliberately avoiding the girl. "Excuse me. Do you mind?"

The guards glanced at each other briefly, before one said, "Ah, Sheba..."

"Felix is my guest," she said firmly, placing her hands on her hips.

"But your father-"

"You will let him in," she said, and Felix found himself suddenly curious how this would play out.

The other guard tried his luck. "Faran has barred entrance to him."

"I don't think so." Rather than continue the discussion, Sheba began walking forward again.

The guards exchanged nervous glances again, evidently unsure of what to do. Felix counted on their indecision and fell into step behind Sheba, hoping her firmness would get them through. He had not missed the furious looks that flew his way.

One of the guards decided he trusted Faran's judgment over Sheba's. Felix found it difficult to blame him, despite his frustration. Despite Sheba's unusual standing in the town, she was still just a young girl. He had no doubt that the townspeople had encountered her stubborn attitude just as much as he had.

What they had *not* encountered was the powerful determination that hid beneath it. The guard on the right stepped in front of her, holding his spear sideways to block passage. "He can't enter. I have my orders."

Sheba stopped and looked up at the man, her hands returning to her waist. "Move," she said quietly.

The guard held his ground. "I can't allow him to-"

The girl waved her hand. A gale howled from nowhere, kicking dust and sand up into the air, stinging at Felix's face, but the brunt of the wind struck the guard. It shoved the man aside in the way Sheba herself could not, sending him tumbling down onto the cracked ground. Sheba turned her head to the others, who parted for her, pulling their weapons back, then continued into the town.

Felix cautiously watched them as he passed, praying none of them would attempt anything; any violence from Sheba

could be smoothed over in the town, but any by him would be remembered for a long time.

Once they had passed the gate, he stepped up next to her. "That might not have been the best idea," he muttered.

"I don't care," she snapped. "He was irritating me. I'm not letting them treat you like that."

"I'm just saying there were other ways to handle it," he said calmly, recognizing the anger filling her all too well. Perhaps that was how she dealt with the heat so easily. "Attacking someone friendly to you is never a good idea."

She snorted. "That wasn't an attack. I pushed him aside. He'll live."

"It would have been better to-"

"It's done, Felix. Drop it," she said shortly.

He did. She had moved past rational action or thought and would not listen to him, regardless of what he said. Her determination had receded, leaving her stubbornness to linger on. He only hoped he could try and mediate for what he knew would come next.

Faran had called for his banishment from Lalivero. Sheba's father. Felix had never met the man, only Sheba's mother, but evidently he had not taken as well to his daughter's explanations. Which, in turn, would lead to *her* not taking well to *his.* His very presence had created a schism between the two, and given Sheba's recent family issues, if he could not patch it, the girl might never recover.

He stole another casual glance at her. She tried so very hard to be strong, to put on a tough front. They all did, at some

point or another. When they had first met in the desert, they found her hiding amongst the rocks from one of the massive lizards that inhabited the wastes. She thanked them politely for saving her, then asked if they could help her to Lalivero. Saturos initially opposed the idea, not wanting to be slowed, but it was Menardi who convinced him otherwise, on the condition that Sheba keep up.

The girl did so admirably, though Saturos' usual pace slowly wore her down. Felix helped her along then, earning a weary smile in thanks from her before she shook herself off and resumed the march alone. By the time they reached the desert's end, however, their plans had changed: she was a Jupiter Adept, after all.

Upon receiving the news that she would not be free to leave them, Sheba fixed them all with haughty stares of indignation, demanding her release. She held her head high, refusing to show them any fear, though during their long periods of silence, Felix could see the shadow of anxiety crossing her face.

Anger was her only means of letting people know her inner pain. She had no idea how to deal with it any other way, so she pushed it aside, fiercely guarding her fear and weakness like a wolf and her pups. If she were to bare those teeth at Faran...

As they neared the house, Felix could feel Sheba hesitating. Her steps slowed to a shuffle over the course of a minute, and the girl continued to look all around her, unable to keep her gaze focused on her house for any extended length of time.

Their approach must have been noticed by someone inside. Felix tensed up when the door flew open, as did Sheba, but

Javen hurtled through the doorway towards them, his face split into a massive grin. Dust kicked up behind him in a thick cloud as he ran, barefoot, across the sands. Felix admired his bravery; he would never dare to touch that sand in the day, not with bare skin.

"Sheba!" the boy shouted, leaping the last few steps at her. She caught him roughly, stumbling back a few steps, but kept her balance as she pulled him tight. "I can't believe you're home!"

"I missed you, buddy," she said quietly, her face pressed into his shoulder. "You have no idea how much."

"Not as much as me," he murmured back.

Sheba laughed, and Felix could see tears in the corners of her eyes. "No, I bet it wasn't."

Zahara appeared in the doorway next, relief flooding her face. She paused long enough to shout back into the house, then moved out towards her daughter as well. Sheba set Javen back down, much to his disappointment, embracing her mother next.

Javen looked over at Felix, staring up at him in silence, his face expressionless.

"I told you I'd keep her safe," he said quietly.

The boy answered with a grin, brushing his sandy hair out of his face, but before he could actually say anything, another cry of "Sheba!" cut across the yard.

Faran stepped out from the house, moving towards them as well. Felix could easily see the joy in his face, though it flickered briefly when he glanced up at Felix. In an instant

he had returned his gaze to his daughter, though, scooping her up into his own hug when Zahara stepped back. The girl held him tightly, but when he set her down, she took a cautious step back. "Why did I have trouble bringing Felix here?"

He glanced up at Felix once more, though he held his expression steady that time, then said gently, "Sheba, why don't we go inside and talk about this?"

Felix could nearly feel her temper flare up once more, though he supposed it had merely been hidden beneath her joy. "No. You owe him an explanation, too. Do you know what he went through for me?"

This was heading in the exact direction he had hoped against. He had an idea why Faran had taken the actions he did, and he understood them, but if this continued, Sheba would not. She would see it as choosing sides between himself and Faran, and in her current state, she would choose Felix. Given her encounters in Anemos, however, he knew he could not allow her to make that choice, even subconsciously. "Sheba, don't worry about it. I have a history here, so it's only right for him to be suspicious."

She turned back to him, doubt on her face. "But that's no reason to-"

"We'll work it out between us," he said, cutting her off. "Spend the night with your family. That's why you're here."

Sheba frowned. "What? Where are you going?"

"I'll stay at the inn," he said, gesturing vaguely behind him. He had no idea where it was, or if they would let him stay, but she had no need to know that. "You need to see them,

and I'll only get in the way of that, at least tonight. Take your time with them, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"But I don't want you to leave," she said quietly.

He smiled at her. "And your family didn't want you to, either. Think about them, today. Forget about me completely. I don't want to even enter your thoughts until the morning. Understood?"

She stared at him for a long moment in silence, then slowly nodded. "Okay. I'll come see you tomorrow morning, then."

Felix looked on as Javen grabbed her hand, tugging her towards the house while fervently telling her about something he had found a few days ago, and Zahara ushered them along. She cast a single glance back at her husband, who remained where he stood, then shut the door behind them.

The silence returned around the two men, both staring at the closed door. Finally, Faran turned to Felix. "That was well done. Thank you."

"She's been through a lot recently," Felix said quietly. "She met her rea- her *birth* family, and they were...not what she expected. She needs you all right now, more than you can know."

Faran nodded silently, pausing for few seconds before saying, "It wasn't because of your history that I told them that. Not truly."

Felix nodded in return. "I know. I put your daughter in danger when I show up, and she willingly walks into it. I understand your concern. I don't think you'll believe me, but it's one of mine, as well. One of the largest."

"I do believe you," Faran said, looking up at the beacon in the distance. "But I also know that concern is not always enough to protect someone, especially when facing such forces." He turned back to Felix. "She's my daughter, Felix, regardless of where she was born. I spend half my time worrying about her safety, the other half worrying about Javen's. Even if it's what she wants, even if I know you'll do everything in your power to protect her, she's still heading into danger."

Felix opened his mouth to say something in reply, but Faran held his hand up, shaking his head. "I know that's not your intent. And I know she's capable of taking care of herself, as both of us have seen. It's a father's concern, one that nothing can lessen or erase. Every time I can't see her, can't touch her, when the only thing of her I can hold are my memories, I worry. You represent that worry, that fear of her leaving and never returning. Not only due to danger," he added, giving Felix a look. "I know how she feels about you."

Felix coughed into his hand, feeling a slight flush creep into his neck. "Her feelings don't have anything to do with leaving here."

Faran gave him the same look that *he* often gave Garet. "Even if you removed them, she still might go with you, but you're a fool if you think they have nothing to do with it. She would follow you over the Falls themselves."

"To be fair," Felix said quietly, "I would do the same."

He turned to the house as a silence fell over the two like the muggy heat of summer in Vale; uncomfortable, but not unexpected. They had nothing more to say to he each other, he knew. As he watched through the window, he saw Jaden continuing to pull his sister along, staring at a gold bangle

on her wrist as he did. Sheba glanced outside as she passed, flashing Felix a smile that he returned immediately.

"Come on, let's go."

Felix turned around, finding Faran a few steps away, paused while looking over his shoulder. "Where to?"

"The inn," he said. "It won't do to have everyone trying to kick you out of town. Sheba will be looking for you in the morning, and..." Faran trailed off for a moment. "And tomorrow, we'll need to put this issue to rest, one way or another."

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"No, no, spread your hands a little more," Garet said.

Ivan shifted his grip on Dullahan's sword slightly. "Like this?"

Garet shook his head. "Wider. You want your rig- uh, left hand up underneath the guard, but the right down near the bottom. Like this," he added, shifting his own sword to his left hand and demonstrating.

The boy followed his lead and frowned, looking down at his hands. "It feels weird."

"That's because you're used to smaller hilts," the redhead said. "You can't swing a long sword the same way. You need momentum. That's what the hand at the bottom is for."

Ivan looked at it for a moment, then nodded. "To use the length as a lever action."

Garet stared at him. "What?"

"Nothing," he said quickly, turning slightly red. "I got it. The hand under the guard is for control, then, right?"

"Yep," Garet said. "You can shift as you get a better feel for it, to adjust between more power or more control, but that's the best grip for now. Give it a few swings, get a feel for it."

He made sure to back away from the boy first, knowing firsthand that a few of those swings would go wild and throw Ivan off-balance. Memories of his own sword lessons from his father came rushing back in a wave of nostalgia, including the time Isaac had nearly taken his head off. While Garet had been handling axes for years and was used to the momentum of a two-handed swing, Mrs. Chayan had firmly refused to let her son handle one.

"With my luck, you'd inherit your axe-handling skills from your father," she always said, before heading off for wood herself. Even before the storm, when her husband had all but died, she had always been the one to wield it.

Ivan had certainly grown stronger over the past year, in more ways than one, but Garet knew it would not be enough to wield the blade effectively. He could swing the sword, certainly, and likely had enough strength to control it well, after some practice to grow accustomed to its weight. To use it in a fight, though, Ivan would need even more, else his endurance would give out in barely a minute.

Though the boy had come to him for lessons in heavier blades, Garet now found himself running through various strength-training regimens in his head, Ivan's practice swings having slipped from his mind almost entirely, though he did automatically step back when the Jupiter Adept stumbled forward once.

Not until Ivan had nearly reached him did Garet suddenly snap back into focus, finding the boy staring at him in concern. "Sorry, what?"

"I asked if you were okay," Ivan said, stabbing the sword into the ground while raising an eyebrow. "You looked a bit distant."

"Yeah, sorry, just thinking about some things to help you with this," Garet said, gesturing to the sword. "Why are you so suddenly interested, though? You've never really cared before."

He shrugged, scuffing one of his feet on the ground lightly while looking down at it. "Dunno, I just...wanted to learn something new, I guess."

Garet stared at him. "Cut the bullshit, Ivan. You suck at lying."

The boy frowned, but looked up. "I... You weren't there, in Contigo. When we fought Aeshma..." He shook his head slowly. "I don't want to be weak, Garet. I'm afraid of what will happen if I am."

Garet blinked. *That* was his reasoning? "You're an idiot." Before Ivan could launch a protest or question from his open mouth, Garet cut him off with a sharp swing of his hand. "You think you're weak? Are you serious? Shut up, I don't want you to answer that."

The Valean paused, then sheathed his sword and placed his hands on his hips. "Ivan, when we met, I could barely tell you apart from a little girl. When I ruffled up your hair, you could have passed for Isaac's little sister."

"Yes, and I remember half of Bilibin thinking the same," Ivan said flatly.

Grinning, Garet said, "You didn't just look like a girl, though. You were quiet, shy, and let people walk all over you. You were scared of your own shadow. You could barely make more than a gust. Now look at you." Garet began to walk slowly around the younger boy. "You've faced down dragons and nightmares, bringing down Thor's wrath on their heads. You've stood your ground against people way more powerful than you, *while knowing it.* You don't even look that much like a girl anymore."

Ivan rolled his eyes. "Thanks, my masculinity is restored."

"My point is," Garet continued firmly, "you're not weak, so cut it with the self-doubt. So you lost a fight. Big deal. Alex did too, and he's a hell of a lot stronger than any of us. So you're a bit stringy and fight with a toothpick. Whatever, I've watched you dance circles around Isaac in duels. It's pretty effective."

"Maybe," Ivan said, "but your way of fighting is still better."

Garet stepped towards him and poked the boy in the chest. "No, *I'm* just better. Get it right. The style doesn't matter, it's how well you can use it. I'm big. I'm strong. Like a dog. Why wouldn't I use that to my advantage? You're more like a cat. When was the last time you saw a cat chase after something bigger than it and try to overpower it?"

Ivan shook his head. "Never. They wait for an opening, then pounce." He sighed. "You're right. I just... I don't like that feeling of helplessness. I don't like having to rely on others to save me."

Garet grinned, then clapped a hand on Ivan's shoulder. "Yeah? Neither did Clotho, and look where that got him."

The boy suddenly frowned, but before Garet could ask, he said, "I had a dream the other day. You were in it."

"Woah, Ivan, I mean, I know we're close and all..." Garet said, backing away and raising his hands defensively.

Ivan made a face at him, then shook his head. "No, I think it was about the future. I saw you fighting Atropos."

Garet dropped his hands to his waist, tapping his foot thoughtfully. "What makes you think it was a vision?"

"We didn't meet Atropos until later that day."

"...Okay, yeah, that'll do it." Now Garet found a frown pulling on his mouth, a chill running down his back. He never cared for Ivan's prophecies, especially when they involved them, but he had trouble denying their usefulness. "What did you see?"

Ivan shrugged. "Not much. You were in the Anemos palace, wearing the Myrtle armor, and...you were winning. Had won, I guess. I didn't really see anything of it, just you two talking after."

Garet turned away, looking up at the palace. If it was a prophecy, then that was good news...right? It proved their plan, that his sword and Psynergy skills could overcome the king's remaining capabilities. He still had reservations about the idea, of course; they knew very little about how Atropos fought, and nothing about Lachesis. How could he reasonably compare his abilities against such an unknown?

It left a lot up to chance. Chance got people killed. There were times where fighting an enemy of unknown capabilities was necessary, of course. Lemuria had been one of them. Mars Lighthouse had been another. Knowledge of the enemy made things much more certain, though.

He had proven it before. After fighting Saturos at Mercury Lighthouse, Garet went over the fight in his head several times. He firmly fixed the battle in his mind, recalling exactly how Saturos moved, pressed an advantage, gave ground, defended his back and flanks, everything. He studied it almost every night before sleeping, not only to learn from the man, but also to learn *about* him, to study how he fought.

When they met on Venus' aerie, the situation had been different, of course. Menardi's presence changed his tactics, having a partner to guard him, and the lack of dampening of his Psynergy allowed him to rely less on his sword. When Garet's blade met his, though, the Valean saw surprise on the Proxian's face as the younger man fought him back, anticipating his movements so well it bordered on precognition. Saturos shifted his own tactics, of course, sliding into a style of swordplay that focused more on using Psynergy to augment his strikes, but the few moments of utter control had been there. Everything that Saturos did, Garet *wanted* him to.

Garet had done the same with others, though he never saw such a pure example as with Saturos. No one else who fought to kill him had been fought twice, giving him the chance to apply the learned knowledge so specifically, but with each opponent, he continued to study their movements and tactics, guessing at their thoughts and plans, trying to get inside their heads. He found it much more difficult with the bandits and ruffians they sometimes encountered on the

roads - they generally relied on intimidation, not skill, so he often had difficulty determining if a particular movement had been a calculated measure or a foolish blunder.

He learned from them, too, though. He quickly discovered how clearly he could remember fights, and for quite some time. Many had faded by now, of course, though some remained, such as both battles against Saturos. He owed a lot of his skill with his sword to their fallen foe, from the form he had learned in reflection, then mastered through practice.

"You've got that distant look again."

Garet blinked, then turned to Ivan again. "Sorry, just thinking."

"About Atropos?" he asked.

"Yeah, sort of," Garet said, nodding and looking out towards the city. Thin wisps of clouds streaked across the sky, brightly lit by the setting sun. It made the city look like it was burning, the thicker clouds above those pluming upwards like great columns of smoke.

He felt Ivan move beside him, saying quietly, "I'm sure you can beat her. You're the best swordsman I know."

While he might not know how Atropos fought, Garet knew his own styles very thoroughly. He had tactics for dealing with stronger opponents, for faster opponents, for opponents with polearms or axes. It would take a supernatural being to hit him with something he had not imagined, something he had not planned for. Something like how Aeshma had attacked Ivan simply by knowing his name.

But Atropos, while powerful, was still only human.

Still. Caution.

Garet slid over, throwing an arm around Ivan's shoulders. "Maybe. I try to avoid biting off more than I can chew. Knowing your limits and capabilities is far more important than just getting stronger, because there's always someone else even stronger. Or a monster. Or multiple people. Or multiple monsters. Or an angry Jenna."

Ivan laughed, a sound that made Garet relax slightly. Despite how he often made fun of Ivan for it, he liked the similarities it had to Aaron's. Both held the high-pitched chimes of children, reminding him once again that Ivan had not yet even reached manhood. Technically.

Technically, he and Isaac left Vale as men. Young men, green men, but men nonetheless. Garet remembered how proud he felt on his sixteenth birthday, and despite how nervous he felt about leaving, he had been excited. Excited to go on an adventure, excited to prove himself to his parents, excited to be chosen to save the world...

He had been no more a man than Aaron was now.

He had difficulty picking out the exact moment that he realized it. Was it their first night in the Goma Caverns, where the echoing sounds of those that shared the darkness had kept all three of them awake through the night? Was it in the snowfields outside Imil, where he completely froze after a bear shredded Ivan's back, coming inches from killing the boy? Could it have been on their first day on the ocean, wondering at how powerless all of them felt, despite their victories?

Looking back, he believed that in that moment, wherever it might have been, he truly became a man. It had nothing to do with age, that much was obvious now, though he found it

difficult to define. He simply knew it. The sensation was not the proud, back-straightening feeling he had upon leaving Vale - I am a man! - but rather, a sinking feeling somewhere in his stomach, one that came in the dark of night to question every decision he made - oh gods, I am a *man.*

It was not a feeling he expected anyone else would have been able to help him with, or even accurately identify. Others' opinions on whether or not he was a man now no longer mattered; the truth was inside him.

He glanced over at Ivan again. What about him? How did the boy feel about it? Had he even consciously thought about it? He had never seemed to place much importance on the label, though he did dislike being referred to as a child.

Garet turned fully towards him, resting his hand on the pommel of his sword. "Well? You ready to go back inside?"

Ivan looked up at him for a moment, then shook his head firmly. "No. We've still got more to go over." When Garet raised an eyebrow, he continued. "Just because I can't use it effectively doesn't mean I can't *learn* to."

The grin that came over Garet's face move on its own, despite his best efforts to force it back down. "You ever heard how curiosity killed the cat?" he asked the young man opposite him.

Ivan's face mirrored his. "Don't you know? Cats have nine lives."

As Garet began to draw his sword again, though, a shout from behind him caught his attention. He spun around, scanning the grounds quickly, then realized the shout had come from down the road a bit. He glanced back to find Ivan

pulling his sword from the grass and following him, so he continued towards the shout.

More shouting followed, though it sounded quieter than the previous one, with more urgency than alarm. He kicked his feet into a light jog, stepping onto the road and heading down it. He could see the guards that normally stood atop the hill crouched in the road's center a short distance away, with one shouting instructions for a third to bring bandages and more help.

A blond woman knelt between them, her hair half-dyed with her own blood. Garet could see the front of her clothes splattered with blood as well, while some of it dripped down into the road. The woman herself remained hunched over, her hair swaying back and forth with the faint motion of her breaths, obviously heavy and ragged.

"What happened?" he called out as he approached, slowing down so as not to plow them all over.

One guard shook his head. "No idea. She just came up here like this, stumbling up the road. She's barely conscious."

Whether the woman knew they were talking about her, or simply looked up at the sound of voices, Garet had no idea, but when she met his eyes, he found his sword in hand without any memory of drawing it, the blade pressed against her neck.

"Please," Atropos whispered. "Help me..."

Chapter 17: Stumbling in the Dark

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 17 – Stumbling in the Dark

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Wind howled around the aerie, screaming its eerie chorus as it carried around great pockets of snow. The blizzard filled so much of the air that Isaac could barely see the black skies beyond. As it spun around him, the very air itself seemed to ignite, each snowflake catching the warm light of the beacon and reflecting it back.

Isaac stood before the beacon with the golden blade of Prox in one hand, his entire body shaking. He did not tremble from fear; he had stood here before, in the same situation, and though he had failed last time, he did not fear failure again. He did not shudder from horror; though he once faced a hideous creature here that hid an even more hideous truth, he looked back on the memory with more shame than anything else. He did not shiver from the cold; on the contrary, the beacon's brilliant radiance melted any snow before it could even consider touching the aerie.

He shook with rage. Pure, unfiltered rage, not a simple black or white, or hot or cold, but an incredible fury that spanned the entire spectrum of existence. It had taken hold of his body, mind, heart, and soul, combining them into a single, unstoppable force whose voice could invoke terror with a word, whose commands could never be disobeyed.

Once more, he felt the presence of Mars itself, the very essence of the element and all its influence on Weyard. He

felt it wrap around him, searching inside his body, mind, heart, and soul, searching for whatever it sought inside him.

He had no patience for such a search.

Isaac's eyes remained fixed on the beacon as he shifted the blade to his side, grabbing hold with both hands. The presence around him almost seemed to pause, as if questioning what he intended to do. In the next instant it all but vanished entirely, only the faintest wisps remaining in observation.

He spoke no words this time. No language of Weyard held the words that could properly translate his feelings. Instead he spoke in the language of fury, the pure speech of anger, the high tongue of rage. His mouth opened in a raw, throaty scream, his vocal chords rippling in ways they had never been used. The rage clawed its way from his stomach as it escaped, throwing itself at the beacon eagerly.

Isaac followed it. He sprinted across the aerie, pulling the glowing sword back as he did. When he reached the beacon's well, he threw himself into the air and swung the blade forward, his scream reaching a new pitch. The blade struck the beacon solidly and both turned pure white as Isaac remained suspended in midair. He continued screaming, his throat feeling like it was ripping apart, never taking his eyes from the beacon.

After a moment, the sword slipped into the beacon as if it were a sphere of water. Isaac followed, vanishing into the white light entirely, his scream echoing through the night.

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Sheba reached out and knocked on the door, then stepped back, clasping her hands behind her. She rocked slightly

between her heels and her toes, humming a soft tune to herself. The tune had been stuck in her head from the moment she woke, though she had no idea why; her mother sometimes hummed it, but Sheba had not heard her do so in months.

A rustle came from behind the door, followed by a gentle scrape of wood upon wood. One of Felix's eyes suddenly appeared in the crack of the doorway. It stared at the girl for a moment before the door opened more, revealing the man, still dressed in his travel clothes and holding his sword by the sheath.

Sheba frowned as she pushed the door completely open. Felix's other hand rested on a chair, though the room's desk sat on the opposite wall, beneath the window. The bed behind him remained undisturbed. She peeked around the corner and found his pack sitting against the same wall as the door, malformed in a way that made her suspect someone had been leaning on it. She looked back up at him with a raised eyebrow. "You look like you slept well."

He grunted and turned away from the door, missing the eye roll it prompted from Sheba. "There's always people who don't listen. I didn't want to take the chance." His gaze drifted to the dark window before he turned back around. "Gods, Sheba, what *time* is it?"

"Um...early," she said, twisting her hands guiltily. "I...kinda wanted to show you something."

Felix grunted again, shaking his head. "You didn't cut your time with your family to be here this early, did you?"

Sheba quickly waved her hands. "No! No, no, no. Ivan gave me this little sandglass a while ago, one that rings bells after

a certain amount of time. I used it to make sure I could be here on time."

He stared at her from inside the room for a moment, then sighed. "Give me a minute."

The door shut once more, leaving Sheba alone in the silent hallway. A soft snoring drifted out from the room behind her, and she wondered who could possibly be using the inn. Few people actually visited Lalivero, after all, and when they did, it was usually to visit someone in particular. The inn only existed because the owners' children had moved elsewhere, leaving the pair alone in a relatively large house. Rather than move, though, they simply rented the upstairs rooms out when required.

Usually, though, they were used for family disputes. Sheba remembered how unruly some of the people became after drinking, and in a few cases, their spouses would refuse to let them in. The innkeepers always let them in at night, never turning anyone away, then settled all debts in the morning - one way or the other.

She leaned back against the wall, closing her eyes as a chill ran through her body. With the sun down, the temperature had dropped significantly, but Sheba knew better than to wear any additional layers. Within an hour of the sun rising, the heat would begin cooking them all once more.

The walk over had been odd, though. Despite living here for almost all of her life, she rarely found herself awake at this hour, much less outside. Any nighttime excursions with friends had been better classified as late evenings, when no one wanted to go home for the night yet. Candlelight could still be seen flickering in windows, people still moved

between buildings, and the quiet murmur of conversation still whispered throughout the town.

In the early hours of the morning, though, Lalivero reminded Sheba of the ocean in a calm. The only lights came from above, while the only sounds came from her own footsteps. Not a soul moved, save her and the gently swaying grasses. The town disturbed her like that, so void of life. She found the hair on the back of her neck standing up and almost turned back, wanting to simply crawl back into bed and lie under the blanket, but she pushed aside the unease and continued to the inn.

When the door opened again, Sheba's eyes did the same. Felix stepped out, carrying his pack and sword, and shut the door quietly behind him. "Alright. Where are we headed?"

She grinned, grabbing hold of his hand and pulling him towards the stairs. "It's a surprise."

Once outside, she turned to him and thrust a pair of canteens into Felix's hands. "That one's ginger tea," Sheba explained, pointing to the smaller one. "Mia showed me how to make it."

Felix raised an eyebrow. "We're teleporting?"

Sheba nodded. "It's too far to walk to be there in time, and I don't think you'll want to walk back once the sun comes up, so I packed a breakfast, too," she said, patting her own bag. She took a deep breath, then looked up at him. "Ready?"

After he nodded as well, she reached out and gently grabbed his hand. The small touch made her stomach rise a few inches, roll over, then settle back down after a stern thought from her. The travel would flip her stomach over enough; no need to add more to it. She closed her eyes,

blocking out the terrifying, distorted sights that awaited one while teleporting, and focused herself. Unlike the trip to Lalivero, she succeeded on her first try, reappearing on the banks of a moderately-sized lake.

The two immediately moved apart, knowing all too well the sensations teleportation evoked. Neither said anything for a few minutes, waiting for the sharp nausea to subside, risking small sips of the ginger tea as they did. Once Sheba felt stable again, she turned around, finding Felix staring out across the dark lake.

"Good thing we weren't a few more feet that way," Sheba said, gesturing with her head towards the lake. "Though we're not as close as I would've liked. Probably about a twenty minute walk still."

Felix shrugged. "Ivan said he landed about an hour away his first time without the lapis, so don't feel too bad about that. You're obviously getting better, at any rate." He turned, scanning around him, his eyes stopping on the yellow light to the southeast. "We're near the lighthouse."

Sheba nodded. "That's not where I was bringing you, though. We're not going that far."

Felix gestured for Sheba to lead the way. The girl hesitated for a moment, realizing that she had not been up to the Red Lake in years. She glanced around thoughtfully for a moment, then mentally kicked herself; the river left the lake. All she needed to do was follow the shoreline.

They started down the small, dark beach in silence for a bit. Sheba's eyes constantly scanned between the trees and the water's edge, knowing all too well the things that sometimes lurked in the dark. In the corner of her eyes, she could see Felix's hand casually resting on his sword, but she saw

through the pretense. Many times had she seen him draw that sword from such a stance, with enough speed to be nearly unavoidable.

She questioned how much she would really be able to do, though, even if she saw something coming. She still could not control lightning, and with a glance up at Venus' beacon, she believed she knew why. Nothing she told herself could erase the memory of the terrible tingling that had flooded her body for that instant. Wind answered fine to her call, despite the similarity in control to the two domains.

...But those weren't the only options, now were they? They were certainly the two most obvious offensive uses of Jupiter Psynergy, but had they not recently learned about another, even more devastating alternative?

The girl looked down at her hands, holding them slightly apart. Wind and lightning were borne of differences, each a result of allowing nature to stabilize itself. Did light work the same way? She briefly considered closing her eyes, but decided against it, not wanting to trip over something. Instead, she focused on the area between her palms, trying to shift the light to the right side.

After almost a minute of concentration, though, she saw no results. She switched tactics, instead trying to pull the shadows to the left, wondering if it worked that way. Another minute later she met with the same result. Biting back her frustration, she turned her palms up, staring at them. What was she supposed to do? How did light even fall under Jupiter's control? Many times she had watched Jenna call light to her hand, rending torches useless to them.

It was not normal light, she realized. Clotho had not controlled a glow, but an energy, one with enough power to

burn whatever it touched. Burning also fell under Mars' control, though she conceded that lightning could burn, as well. She remembered Felix telling Jenna that ice could burn, as well, though in a different manner.

Sheba frowned. Something tickled at the back of her mind as she recalled the conversation, shortly before they had reached Prox. She could see Felix rolling his eyes at something Jenna had said, something about being the best at burning anything. He told her to be careful, otherwise she would find herself surprised...

No, that didn't matter, she thought, shaking her head. What had brought on the conversation? They had encountered a pair of strange monsters, some giant shelled lizards in the ice floes. She remembered Jenna incinerating them completely, which had triggered her boasts. How had she done that? Their heads reached up to the deck of the *Kailani*, far too large to completely-

All at once the full memory returned. She saw Jenna, shouting at the top of her lungs, insulting the lizards' parents or something. The girl had that gleeful battle grin on her face as she hopped up onto the railing, much to Felix's displeasure. The sudden burst of cold as she gathered all the heat around her struck Sheba in the chest solidly, pulling the air right out of her lungs. Everything darkened for a moment except for Jenna; the girl shone like a campfire in the dead of night.

She unleashed everything she had gathered at the giant turtle, Psynergy flowing out of her in a great beam of burning, white energy. When it subsided a few moments later, not only had the lizard vanished entirely, a thick layer of steam drifted over a wide gap in the ice.

That's it, Sheba thought. *That's what it is.*

She stopped suddenly, causing Felix to spin around, his hand firmly wrapping around his sword. "What is it?" he asked.

"Hold on," she muttered. "I think I figured something useful out. Watch." The girl turned to the lake, holding out one of her hands. She took a deep breath, then closed her eyes, trusting Felix to keep watch for monsters. He would anyway, she knew.

She reached into her mind, pulling forth the power of Jupiter stored there. Rather than shape it, influencing the world around her, she merely moved it. She imagined a wind, running through the canyons of her limbs, funneling into the palm of her hand. It carried with it her thoughts, clearing her mind of all distractions. The slight breeze drifting lazily across the lake fell still, the energy creating it absorbed into her body. Even the sound of the small waves hitting the shore dimmed, as did the chirps of the early morning birds that surrounded her.

Felix's sharp intake of breath told of her success. She slowly opened her eyes, finding her hand glowing white, in the same manner Clotho's had in Lemuria. She smiled slightly, careful to avoid pouring too much power into the Psynergy with a teleportation so recent; Jenna had practically written the book for *that* lesson.

It would do. She loosed her hold on the energy in a single thought, gently nudging it in the direction her hand pointed. A white bolt of light shot from her palm, piercing through both the dark morning and the still surface of the lake. It lasted only a fraction of a second, but still enough to leave an afterimage cutting across her eyes. A trail of steam rose

up from the epicenter of the lake's new ripples, curling up and vanishing as it spread out.

Sheba stared out at the rising steam for a few moments, her hand remaining outstretched. Some part of her mind vaguely recognized that her mouth had fallen open, but the rest of it simply ignored the fact. Once the stunned sensation wore off, she spun around to Felix, nearly jumping with glee. "Did you see that? *Did you see that?"*

"It was hard to miss," he murmured, still watching the impact point on the lake's surface. "You figured it out then?"

The girl nodded, unable to contain the grin on her face. "It's not light at all! It's just pure Jupiter energy, that's all! It- oh!" She likely would have simply continued her rant, but all at once she remembered her actual reason for being out here. "We should keep going, though. I don't want us to be late."

Felix raised an eyebrow at the comment, but turned and resumed walking with her nonetheless. "Do you think this will help you get over your issue with lightning?" he asked.

Sheba stumbled slightly, catching herself without any trouble. "Um, what?"

"Sheba, I'm not an idiot," he said, causing her cheeks redden slightly as she looked down. A few moments of awkward silence passed before Felix sighed. "I'm sorry, that came out harsher than I meant. I've known about your lightning issue since we found the Myrtle, though."

"I... I didn't want to worry you with it," she muttered, looking out at the lake.

Felix grabbed her arm and stopped. "Sheba. Look at me."

She reluctantly turned back to him, feeling like a child about to be sternly talked to for sneaking a cookie. She bit her lip slightly as she looked up at him. He towered over her even more than her father did, and his face carried an expression identical to the one Faran used for such situations.

Evidently he realized this, Sheba noticed; only Isaac could shift his body language so radically to react to people unconsciously. Felix's expression softened, and then much to Sheba's surprise, he grabbed one of her hands and dropped to a knee. She felt her heart flutter once, but her head swiftly booted it back down with some common sense.

"I know you're trying to help me," he said quietly. "I know you don't want to be seen as weak. I don't really want to bring you into any of this, but I know you'll just come anyway. If you're going to help us, though, I need to know *exactly* what I can count on you to do. I spent a lot of time learning it, for all of you, and that's the cornerstone of many of my decisions."

He gestured with a nod towards the lake. "Knowing you've figured that out is great. The more you can do with your Psynergy, the safer I feel about you. But if you're having trouble with something, I need to know that, too. You almost died in that cave because you kept that a secret from me. We *all* almost died. You see that, don't you?"

Sheba nodded meekly. "I didn't mean to get anyone hurt."

"I know you didn't," Felix said. "But even good intentions can cause a lot of problems."

The girl stared down at him for a minute, idly noticing how odd it felt for their positions to be reversed, then lunged forward suddenly. She threw her arms around Felix's neck, settling her chin onto them. After a moment, she pulled back

awkwardly. "S-sorry. I didn't... I know you don't think of me the same..."

Felix smiled and stood back up, stepping forward and pulling the girl back towards him in a hug. She wrapped her arms around him again and closed her eyes, pressing the side of her face into his chest. "I kicked down the front gate of the Anemoi palace to rescue you, Sheba," he murmured. "I don't think a hug is going to bother me."

She chuckled from inside his embrace, then slowly stepped back. "Come on, we're almost there," she said with a smile.

They continued on for a short while in silence, to which Sheba had no objections. She suspected that if she said anything more, she would simply make fool of herself again, or burst into tears, or something equally ridiculous. Her emotions tumbled around inside of her, constantly battling for supremacy, and she frequently found herself forcibly suppressing one, only to fend off the attack of another mere seconds later.

None of which would help resolve anything with Felix, of course. He had spoken his thoughts on the matter in Yallam and she had accepted them. She would not push him into anything. Doing so would likely only force him away, at any rate. All she could do was spend time with him, and hope that someday he grew to feel the same, or else she moved on.

She really, really hoped for the former.

They reached the bridge with not long to spare, Sheba noticed. The sky had lightened considerably already, no longer tinged yellow by Venus' light. As she reached the wide, wooden structure, she slowly reached out and touched

one railing with her hand, remembering the chaos around her last visit here.

For a moment, the sharp crack of thunder echoed from within her own mind, but she pushed it aside. That day had nothing to do with her trip here. She stepped up onto the bridge, gesturing for Felix to follow, and led him over to the railing that overlooked the ocean. "This is the Nol River," she said, then nodded towards the falls just ahead. "It dumps directly into the sea right down there."

Felix stopped beside her, leaning on the railing. "I remember coming through here...before."

Sheba glanced over at him, then looked back to the sea. The light had colored the water blue now, leaving sunrise only minutes away. She glanced to the east, finding it cloudless. Lemuria's eternal bank of fog would have interfered had they been only a short distance further south, but the sun rose just before the murk began.

"I used to... I would come here a lot, after we all went home," she said after a minute. "My parents were worried. I never showed much interest in any of my studies. How could I? They were boring, more than before. I didn't want to sit in a building and read about the history of Suhalla. I wanted to explore it, to see what I could find. I wanted to spend days with Piers, hearing about Lemuria, or learning how to navigate by the stars. I wanted to spend time with Jenna, who had become my best friend in ways my ones back home could never hope to."

She swallowed. "I... I wanted to spend time with you. That was all. I just wanted to be near you, to hear your stories as we walked, to talk about the people and places we had seen together by the campfire. In some ways, I wished we'd never

restored Alchemy." The girl shook her head, leaning down onto the railing. "I was ready to leave. I *did* leave. I made it all the way here before the thoughts of my family finally turned me back. I couldn't leave them like that, with no warning, especially Javen. He wouldn't understand."

Felix said nothing, for which Sheba found herself very grateful. Once she started talking, she found it much easier. "I can't stay here, though. There's nothing here. Even if I were to take charge of Lalivero, so what? We're a bunch of gatherers, hunters, and fishers. We don't *do* anything that really needs a leader. Before all this," she waved her hand vaguely out at the ocean, hoping Felix understood her meaning, "I probably could have. But knowing what's out there, I never could now."

She fell silent, unsure of how to continue, or even if she needed to say anything further. Felix seemed to pick up on this and asked, "Are you sure that's what you really want?" When she looked over at him in confusion, he continued. "If I were to change my mind and live here, for the rest of my life, would you still want to leave?"

The girl pondered on that for a long moment. "No, I guess I wouldn't. I mean, I don't want you to think I'm just going to follow you around!" she added frantically. "It's not like that! I just... I... I love you, Felix," she said softly, the words continuing to feel strange coming out of her mouth. "I... Oh, I don't know. I don't know what I want anymore."

She felt an arm drape around her shoulders. "You could stay here with me, if I did that, but I don't think you'd be happy, Sheba. You're similar to me in that; you need to be doing something. You might be fine with sitting back for a short time, but you'll get bored. Our difference is that you want to share your adventure with someone. It doesn't necessarily

need to be with me. You would probably stay here with Jenna, too. Am I right?"

Sheba nodded slowly. "But what about my family? Why don't I want to stay with them?"

"Because you've only shared a normal life with them," Felix said. "You need someone who can appreciate your thrill for excitement, who can stand with you as an equal. Your parents will never be like that. Their time for that has passed. Someday, Javen might, depending on how he grows, and what he does, but he's still too young to join you now."

"Maybe you're right," she said quietly. "There's... There's something different in how I feel when I'm with you, or Jenna, or Garet, or anyone, than when I'm with people here."

"Remember when we talked about love?" Felix asked. "There are many different kinds, you know. In this case, here's love of a friend, and then there's love of a comrade. They can overlap, for certain, but you share different things with them, create different bonds."

Sheba opened her mouth to say something further, but the sun chose that moment to peek over the horizon. Light spilled across the ocean in a golden wave, washing past them in a warm glow. The girl closed her mouth and smiled, pointing out at the edge of the waterfall.

Plumes of mist always rose from the basin below in great clouds, spreading outward as they slowly faded. When the light struck them, it fractured, arcing across the edge of the waterfall in a shimmering, vivid rainbow. It wavered slightly as the mist rose in a never ending cycle.

"I saw this that morning," she said softly, leaning her head against Felix's chest. She reached up with her hand and

gently placed it over the one that still rested on her shoulder. "I kept coming back to see it, waiting for the day I could show it to you."

"It's beautiful," Felix muttered, then fell silent.

Sheba understood. She needed no words, either.

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As Piers reached the top of the stairs, the morning sun shone in his face through the triple-pane windows. As he raised a hand to block the sudden light and glanced around, he found Jenna sitting at the table with Madrona and Altefeuer, her hands holding Madrona's dagger. The girl raised the small blade up to her face, turning and angling it, watching the flames dance along its sharp edges.

He joined the trio at the table, seating himself with polite greetings. Before he could ask anything, Jenna turned to him. "Madrona thinks this might be what we're looking for," she said, holding up the dagger for him to see.

Piers glanced over at the midwife. "Isn't that just from the hydra's flame sac? I would have thought it to have burned out by now."

"Hydra nectar burns low, but burns for a long time," Madrona said, holding her hand out to take the blade back. "We tend to use it more for our oil lamps inside, mixing it with tree sap for outside use in lanterns. It burns brighter then, but not as long."

"It's also very sweet," Altefeuer added, smiling slightly. "Makes an excellent glaze, though it takes much caution to cook with. Too much heat, and everything ignites."

Madrona gave the man a long glance, then turned to the window to her left. "I've spoken to Einion about it. He's never attempted infusing a blade with pure Mars energy, but he agrees that it could work."

Piers frowned. "You don't have any already, then? Leftover from the golden age, perhaps?"

The woman turned her hawkish eyes on him. "What use would we have for swords that control fire? We can do that plenty well on our own."

"Of that I have no doubt," Piers said calmly. He had seen the woman intimidate Isaac, but the Valean always found aggressive people intimidating. Piers might have been - how had she said it? - *stoically aloof,* but he found few people capable of bullying him. Madrona meant no harm by it, he knew; it was simply how she lived. "You've seen the boost such a blade can give, however. Isaac's aided his Venus powers significantly."

Madrona's mouth twisted into a thoughtful frown. "Perhaps," she admitted after a few moments of silence. "We know of no such swords, though. They've all likely been lost to time."

"Was our other blade of no use?" Altefeuer asked. "I heard of the troubles you braved to retrieve it. I would hate for them to have been a waste."

Jenna shook her head at the elder. "We just haven't figured it out yet. Isaac says he thinks he almost had it, but the sword didn't judge him worthy, or something. He said the feeling was really confusing. How does a sword judge you, anyway?"

The old man sighed. "There are many things we do not know about that blade, save what the legends wrote. Perhaps it is best that they remain secrets."

"That's enough about swords for now," Puelle said as he approached the table with Hama, both carrying several plates of food. "I don't allow two things at meals: disrespect towards the cook and talk of swords."

Jenna looked up in confusion. "Why no talking about swords?"

"Because it usually just winds up turning into an argument about the best kind," the man said, moving opposite Hama to set the plates down. "Nothing good ever comes of it."

"Fair enough," Jenna said, her eyes on the food. Piers could practically see her mouth watering.

Not that he could blame her. Proxians held large breakfasts while the temperature was still cold, allowing them short lunches to maximize the time work could be done before sunset. As with every culture's largest meal, their best dishes showed up during it, leaving visitors often imagining how wonderful the other two meals must be.

Lunch, however, generally tended to be nothing more than leftovers from breakfast, and supper was a light meal, meant to last one until sleep. A Proxian breakfast, however, could rival the banquets held in other cities. They had learned ways to utilize fish and meat that few other cultures had, having little in the way of vegetables or other growable products. Some light trade with Loho and the small island of Kalt had begun to help with that, but time would improve those lines.

While Puelle had only banned talk of swords, they shared the meal in silence regardless. Once they finished, Piers quickly found himself in quiet conversation with Puelle. His conversation with Einion had evidently been shared with Prox's leader, who found the idea very much to his liking.

To his side, Madrona asked Jenna about her parents and brother, wondering about the former's health and why the latter had not returned for a visit. The woman tsked and criticized him for the excuses Jenna offered, though Piers noted her tone lacked the disdain she had often spoken to Isaac with. "The Durants have been worried sick about him," she said. "They don't like getting reports from anyone but him about his wellbeing."

Hama frowned as she looked over. "Are they not aware of how occupied he is right now?"

Madrona shrugged. "They're old." After a small cough from Altefeuer, she pursed her lips and added, "And unlike the present company, they're not all there anymore."

"Ma," Puelle said reproachfully.

She rolled her eyes. "Don't even start. I love them as much as you do, but they've lost the means to do much more than take care of the young ones."

"It is a great tragedy indeed," Altefeuer agreed. "To see their minds wither before their bodies... I've only seen it a few times. I'm unsure whether to call them fortunate or not."

Piers frowned. "They still live, though. I could understand if they suffered in agony daily, with no hope of respite, but the fact that they yet live should always be a blessing."

The old man nodded, leaning back and gently running his fingers through his thick, green beard. "There is truth in your words. Life is always a blessing, to be sure. But is the continuation of life the same?"

The Lemurian sat forward, folding his arms on the table. "I'm not sure what you mean, elder. Do you mean to say that

they might be better off by passing?"

"Better off?" Altefeuer paused for a moment, considering the words. "No, I don't believe so. As we agree, life is always a blessing, and Tiamat leaves surprises for us around every corner. We can never hope to foretell how a life will go, or make a judgment whether it should be worth continuing."

Piers noted that the rest of the table had fallen silent, five pairs of eyes on them. He belatedly realized that Einion had entered at some point, silently, but had decided against speaking yet. Piers opened his mouth to express his confusion again, but Altefeuer continued, evidently having just paused for thought again.

"*We* cannot, at least, but I fully believe the gods can," he said. "Tell me, Piers, can death not be a blessing as well?"

He felt his body tighten slightly in the chair. Breathing deep, he slowly relaxed his muscles, forcing his mind into a neutral area. "No," he said after a few moments of silence. "No, I do not believe so. I may be a warrior, but I have never considered my enemy's death to be a good thing, merely the least deplorable outcome."

Altefeuer shook his head. "Again, we are in agreement. It was not of death in battle that I meant, however, or even death by the hand of man." He frowned for a moment, then said, "I have known the Durants nearly my entire life. I played with them when we were children, many years ago. I remember their wedding, the loss of their first child, the birth of their first grandchild... They have been great friends to me these long years."

He sighed and turned his eyes down to the table. "They remember these things as well...for now. If I ask them about what they did last week, or bring up a conversation we had

then, they do not. That gap of memory will spread. They will be unable to remember more than five days prior, or three days, until eventually, they will live entirely in the present, incapable of recalling previous encounters. Nor will it stop there. The memories ingrained deeply upon their hearts will fade as well, until nothing is left. They will be nothing but a blank slate, mere shadows of their former selves, of people that once loved and danced and sang and built."

The elder raised his gaze back to Piers, and the man found it free of accusation. "Have you ever watched a man break down into tears when his own mother no longer recognizes him? Have you ever had to lie to a widow who asks about her departed husband every day, because you can no longer bear to watch her break down again every time you tell her the truth?"

Piers opened his mouth briefly, then closed it again. What could he say to that? The waters of Lemuria kept his people healthy, until the distant day when their bodies failed. Only those born with unfortunate conditions left them early, or those who experienced unfortunate accidents. He looked into Altefeuer's tired eyes and felt like a child again before the age in them.

"I understand your thoughts," the Proxian said quietly. "I would never wish harm on them, of course. Sometimes, though... Sometimes, I wonder if the gods might show mercy to them. I wonder if their continued life will have meaning, or just result in a constant, ever growing torture for those close to them."

An uncomfortable silence fell in the house, the crackle of the fire the only audible sound. Piers looked down at his folded hands on the table. *Mercy...* The word twisted inside him. Had he not made that same choice once? Had he not

attempted to play the gods and give a mercy, one crueler than death itself?

Einion cleared his throat. "We need to get going," he said, looking at Piers.

Piers raised his eyes again. "Where to?" The moment the words left his mouth, he knew the answer. "The lighthouse."

Nodding, the blacksmith said, "Gonna take more than what I can give to make this thing. We'll do it in the lighthouse. Need you to help pull the sleigh there."

"Of course," Piers said immediately. "Whatever I can help with. Do we need to gather any other supplies first?"

Einion shook his head as he turned back to the door. "Got Liam on that. Travel light. We've got a lot to bring. Come over to the smithy when you're ready."

Piers glanced towards the wall where his Trident rested, briefly considering leaving it behind and just taking his dagger. After a moment, though, he abandoned the thought. That close to Mars, his Psynergy would be dampened, forcing him to rely on physical combat more if they were attacked. Besides, his Trident followed him at all times now.

He stood up, thanking Puelle for the breakfast, then rebuffed Jenna's pleas to come with them. "Why?" she asked, her arms crossing her chest as a scowl crossed her face. "Is this some manly men thing? Girls can't help?"

Madrona raised an eyebrow, a small smile curving her lips up slightly. "Jenna, if Ein didn't want your help, it's because he's got everyone he needs already. He knows what they need, don't worry."

The girl's scowl lingered on, so Piers reached over and wrapped one arm around her waist, then lifted her off the floor slightly. "Tell you what? You do this to me, and you can help us. Deal?"

When he dropped her back to the ground, she merely stared at him for a moment. "You swear?"

"I do," he said, his eyes never leaving hers.

Jenna narrowed her own suspiciously, then stepped over to Piers, wrapping one arm around his waist in the same way he had done previously. She bent her knees, inhaled sharply, then pulled her arm tight and pushed against the floor. Piers felt the girl's muscles tense and strain as she exhaled, but he only moved sideways slightly.

After a moment's effort, she released her grip on him and scowled again. "Not fair. You're too fat."

The Lemurian grinned at her, then moved to the wall and picked up his overcoat, throwing it around him. "Muscle weighs more than fat, Jenna. Maybe you should use the time to build some more." He pulled on a pair of gloves, a woolen hat, and fixed the Trident across his back, then winked at her before stepping out into the snow.

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Kraden gently shut the door behind him, thanking the doctor quietly. The man walked away, leaving Kraden in the hall with Ivan and Isaac. Ivan peered past the scholar at the closed door, then asked. "Is it wise to leave her alone?"

He shrugged. "We know the power she's capable of, even while injured like this. If she wanted to do anything, none of us being there would help."

"We still need to talk to her," Isaac said firmly. "I want to hear her story before I make any judgments."

Ivan shook his head. "It smells like a trap. I don't like it. I don't like her being here."

"Would you send her away then?" Kraden asked, peering over the edge of his glasses at him. "Would you ignore her wounds, which are real, I assure you, and tell her to go back? If she *was* an ally now, doing so would surely change that."

The boy frowned, turning away to look down the empty hallway. Kraden had sent Iodem away, along with several of the people who worked in the palace, as soon as he received word of Atropos' arrival. The man had publicized the act as another step in his efforts to rebuild Tolbi, but Ivan saw through the charade: he wanted the two leaders of Tolbi separated.

Just in case.

Ivan admired the scholar's ability to simultaneously treat the woman as both harmless and the greatest threat the city had seen in recent years. He found himself unable to think of her in any other fashion than that of an Anemian King, biding her time for...something.

It bothered him. Clotho had entered Lemuria brashly, only hiding his true intention behind small talk as a game, never showing weakness or timidity. Even in Anemos, he openly mocked them, his pride eventually leading to his downfall. Atropos, however, arrived with a whisper, placing herself in their hands entirely. She had passed out shortly after being brought inside.

Garet stood nearby for a long time, his sword drawn and held tightly in his hands, staring at the unconscious woman.

Ivan knew his dilemma. To kill Atropos in her sleep would have been simple, quick, and with little blame. Garet spent three hours in her room as the doctor arrived and went to work, saying nothing. In the dark hours of the morning, the man finally left, his blade still clean.

The idea had not been exclusive to him. When he opened the door to leave, he found Ivan sitting against the opposite wall, his sword in his lap. His mind had entertained many dark thoughts as night settled in around him, but in the end, he could not find the nerve. Felix and Alex had been the only one to meet her in battle, and both had described the encounter to be inconclusive about her strength or intent. She showed little interest in stopping them then, or in helping Clotho later.

Much as he believed the whole situation to be a trap, he could not murder her in her sleep without being certain. She had never been aggressively hostile towards them, only in reaction. He had tried to imagine how he would feel if a group of people suddenly forced their way into his home, threatening to steal one of the royal children.

He still did not trust her.

But then again, he spent the better part of a year mistrusting Felix, as well.

Ivan sighed through his nose and turned back to Kraden. "You're right, I'm sorry. We don't have much choice in the situation, do we?"

"We always have a choice, Ivan," the scholar said gently. "But we also need to remember that our choices always have repercussions. In this situation, yes, our best course of action for now is to wait. If you are right, however, keep in mind that *she knows this.* She has hundreds of years of

experience working against us. Be cautious of your words and actions. She may simply be here to gather information on the foes that defeated one thought to be invincible."

Isaac nodded slowly. "In which case, she'll want to talk to me."

"In which case, we should avoid that," Ivan said immediately, looking over at his friend. "I'll talk to her."

Unease immediately covered Isaac's face. "I don't know if I like that. Maybe Garet should go with you, or Kraden."

Ivan shook his head. "Garet wants no part of this. He knows as well as I do that he would likely give things away without realizing. The only thing he could do here would be to stand in the corner and scowl menacingly."

"And I would just be a liability," Kraden said. "My mind would be completely open to her, and I would be none the wiser."

Isaac sighed, cracking his knuckles, and glanced at the door again. "I still don't like this."

"There's not a whole lot to like about the situation," Ivan said quietly, secretly feeling the same. He hated the thought of being in the same room as that woman without Isaac or Garet to support him. "But right now, it's our best course of action."

The Valean's frown deepened as he turned back to Ivan, crossing his arms across his chest. The Proxian sword and his Venus-imbued sword peered from above each shoulder, and Ivan wondered how he managed carrying both swords everywhere. Though he had abandoned his habit of carrying it everywhere after the previous night, Ivan remembered

well how much Dullahan's sword weighed him down when he tried wearing it all day.

His eyes met Ivan's, and the boy found his expression one typically found on Felix, instead. "I'll be right outside," he said, moving to lean back against the wall.

Ivan thanked him quietly, then turned to Kraden. The old man said nothing, but gave him a reassuring squeeze of the shoulder instead. Ivan nodded to him, handed him the slender blade on his waist, then stepped forward. He stared at the door for a long moment, taking slow, deep breaths, forcing his body into a calm state. Thoughts not about Atropos pushed to the edges of his mind, then spilled over, vanishing down into the forgotten depths of his consciousness.

It took another minute, but with his mind focused, he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

The bed lay against the far wall, opening up the small floor space for room to move, likely at the doctor's request. The blond woman lay on her back, her head propped up with several pillows. She had her head turned to the side, gazing out the window at the late Tolbi morning. Despite the reconstruction efforts, Ivan could still see several black craters from the palace. He suddenly wished they had placed her in one of the northern rooms, instead.

She did not move when he shut the door, or even acknowledge his presence. He stood in silence for some time, watching her. Her clothes, ones of beautiful, white silk, had been stained crimson with her blood and sat in a pile in the corner. Instead, she wore an unremarkable nightshirt, vanishing beneath the covers at her waist. Bandages covered a portion of her right arm, her head, and though he

could not see them, Ivan knew they would be across her abdomen, as well.

The king herself seemed pale, though Ivan could not say if she normally appeared so. He suspected blood loss contributed to at least part of it. Much of it still clung to her golden hair, turning rust-colored as it dried. The image brought memories of a dream back to the surface, of a different blond with blood in his hair. He forced them back down, as he did with the shudder that arose from them.

A different, more relevant dream took its place. Ivan had only seen Atropos briefly during their assault on Anemos, during a battle and at a distance. Recognizing the palace from his dream had been the only reason he connected her with the dream-woman, but even now, he found the connection difficult. The Atropos in the dream had appeared feral, cruel, and manic, though Ivan admitted being so close to death might bring out otherwise uncommon traits.

The woman lying on the bed exhibited none of those characteristics. Her eyes moved only as she scanned them across the city, while her expression remained that of the utmost calm and patience. She held her hands high on her chest, folded together. When he looked past the emotions, however, the twisting of features that such rage always induced, he saw the resemblance clearly.

Atropos, King of Anemos, had been in his dream.

As if responding to his confirmation, the woman spoke without moving. "Your city has grown beautiful. It is far larger than I remember."

"It's not my city," Ivan said automatically. "You wouldn't know mine."

Atropos turned to look at him. "No, I doubt I would. Clotho said that most of the old cities had faded, apparently fracturing into small villages. Tolbi was one of the few that remained. In my time, it was known as the City of Peace, founded during the Great War. People banded together in an attempt to build a neutral city, one established for the refugees of the clans. It was believed that by setting such an example, they might inspire a truce."

Ivan watched the woman for a moment, debating with himself mentally, but eventually his curiosity won out. He stepped to the desk and dragged the chair over towards her bed, planting it a moderate distance away, then sat down. "What happened?"

The woman met his eyes and Ivan felt his stomach drop slightly. He knew what happened. "The Mars Clan scorched the city. They laid waste to it for six days, and on the seventh, they left it a smoking ruin."

"I've heard stories of that," Ivan said quietly. "But all our books just speak of a fire that destroyed most of the town. They say nothing of the Mars Clan."

"History is written by the victors," Atropos said, closing her eyes slowly.

Ivan nodded, saying nothing. He understood the hidden meaning behind her words, whether she intended them or not. He had accepted the gravity of their situation long ago, but at the times when its significance pressed on him, he still found it difficult to breathe. The boy closed his own eyes for a moment, clearing his mind of the distractions. *Focus, Ivan.*

The room sat in silence for a few minutes, but eventually he could stand it no more. "Why did you come here?"

Atropos opened her eyes again, looking at Ivan. "For help. My king did not appreciate the loss of Clotho when he returned."

"Your king? I thought you were a king," Ivan said slowly.

"I am," she said. "He is senior to me, though, and now, the true ruler of Anemos. I and Clotho could override a decision of his, but only together. Now, I am powerless while the triumvirate lies broken."

Ivan frowned. The math added up, he supposed. Except... "Why is there no new king? Don't you have anything in place in case one dies without an heir?"

Atropos nodded, then flinched in pain. For a moment, Ivan forgot an enemy lay before him. He immediately stood up and walked to her nightstand, grabbing the glass of some thick tea the doctor had left, supposedly to dull her pain, and handed it to her. "Ah... Thank you," she said, carefully raising it and sipping slowly for a full minute. Once she finished, he placed the tea back onto the table and sat down again. "We do, yes," she continued, as if no interruption had occurred. "One of the other king's children will inherit the empty throne, but not until they prove themselves worthy of it. No prince can ascend until they have earned the Wings of Anemos and demonstrated the will of a leader."

The name sounded familiar, and not simply because of the wings attached to the *Kailani.* "The Wings... Those are your wings, right? I remember hearing that all of the Anemian Kings have wings."

She nodded again, this time without apparent pain. "Yes. They first appear in a moment of strength, or dedication, or willpower, typically during early adulthood. They mark for us that a prince has grown sufficiently enough to rule."

"But none of the princes have earned theirs, yet," Ivan said.

"No," Atropos said. "My daughters are the eldest, and I believe they may be close, and would side with me...but Sheba's brother is forceful. Despite his youth, he is strong-willed, determined to rule, and very intelligent. I believe he will earn his Wings early, and if he earns them before my own daughters, I will remain powerless."

The woman hesitated for a moment, then continued. "That was why I wanted Sheba there. I know she would support me against her father, if she reached the throne first. Having her in Anemos would raise the chances of removing Lachesis from power."

"Is he really so cruel?" Ivan asked. "Why does he want this war, anyway? There are no clans left to oppose him."

"He's..." Atropos paused, considering her words. "He's hard. He rules well, but strictly, and does great things for Anemos. It was his idea to build our own lighthouse and take to the skies. But he has an excellent memory, and he remembers the war. He remembers how it tore Weyard apart, and he believes this to be the best course of action for eventual peace."

"We had peace," Ivan said, feeling anger rise into his voice. "Everything was fine until you returned and started attacking."

"You did, but for how long?" she asked quietly. "As people grew accustomed to their new power, conflict would have arisen, then grown."

The bandits on the outskirts of Tolbi immediately appeared in Ivan's mind. Had they not threatened him with recently learned Psynergy? Had Piers not spent months stranded

because of a newly discovered ability of one he trusted? "That doesn't mean genocide is the right answer," he said in the same tone. "Clotho used the same logic to attack a king who merely wanted peace for *his* people, too."

Atropos snorted, an odd break from the calm and polite demeanor she had exhibited so far. "Clotho was a violent fool. He viewed the world as his experiment, a toy for him to poke and prod and see how it reacted. He was incapable of empathizing with another person. Lachesis... Lachesis is different. He makes his decisions fully aware of their ramifications, but sets aside his feelings for those of his people."

"And he attacked you for jeopardizing them?" Ivan asked. "I don't see how. Did he expect Clotho to lose?"

"Not at all, none of us did," she said. "But he laid the responsibility on me for it. I knew how brash Clotho was. How inexperienced he was, despite his age. He... I've never seen him so furious," she added quietly.

A pang of sorrow ran through Ivan, and he found himself unable to quash it entirely. After a moment of focus, he pushed it aside, clearing his mind again. "What brought you here?"

"A dream," Atropos said, turning back to the window. "One I failed to recognize the significance of until it was almost too late."

Ivan shoved aside the cold lump that formed in his stomach He briefly weighed the risk of speaking his mind, then nodded. "Then we seem to have a common ground," he said calmly. "A dream I had warned of a fight with you." The images came to mind automatically at his thought of the dream, fire and blood marring the beautiful palace hall.

Atropos did not respond for a long moment, though her eyes sat unfocused and unmoving. "It was the redhead, wasn't it? The Mars Adept. I had a similar dream."

"How can I trust you, then?" he asked. "How could I, now that I know what will happen?"

She sighed, dropping her head and closed her eyes again. "A vision does not dictate the *necessary* future, only a possible one."

Ivan frowned, sitting forward slightly. "What do you mean?"

"The future is always in motion," she said. "If we saw these visions, but were unable to act, they would proceed as seen. By being given that glimpse, though, it affects the choices we make. If you have a vision, for example, of yourself dying at a specific location, you would avoid that location at all costs, correct? Your vision would then never come to pass."

"So you're saying this dream won't happen?"

Atropos shook her head. "No. When Clotho asked me to leave, I could have refused. I considered it, actually. Had I stayed, it would have led to the conflict we both saw."

"Why didn't you, then?" Ivan asked. If he had seen her making a choice, wouldn't that have been the expected choice, unless he acted on it?

The woman smiled slightly, opening her eyes and looking up at him again. "It was your friends, actually. I happened to meet them on the roof, and saw their dedication to Sheba firsthand. It...made me question my plan. Not enough to help them, but enough to remain neutral. Had I not met them, I would have remained near Clotho, at least. I doubt you would have used the same tactics in that case."

Ivan considered it. If they were not certain Atropos would not interfere, what would they have done? A variation of the same plan, likely. Sheba would have fled, but Felix would have remained behind, for sure, to ensure her getaway. He could not predict anything further than that, but the Garet likely would have stayed, as well.

Moreover, her words held a deeper meaning. Hama had told him the dream's outcomes could be changed, sometimes, but he never realized the choice weighed entirely on *him.* He knew he could catalyze such changes, with the help of others, but alone? How could he change some of the things he had seen?

The king's explanation of possible futures also explained discrepancies in some of his dreams. Despite witnessing the deaths (or their aftermath, rather) of several of his friends, they lacked consistency. He had witnessed all of them mourning the passing of Kraden, alive, yet then seen a few surviving members attacking Lachesis, with Kraden *alive.* Were those two paths available to him?

The gears of his mind spun again, making a small whirring sound to him as they did. He tried to call back as many dreams as he could, organizing them in his head. He stacked the images, shifting them around, discarding the ones that he knew were not visions. Some stood alone, such as his dream of Deadbeard, but others fell into a pattern.

Alex and Mia. It had started there. Hama had helped him to realize it did not necessarily mean he killed her, but she did admit it seemed to indicate he would be responsible for her death. Isaac and Piers, however, seemed deliberately murdered. All three were absent in his dream of attacking Lachesis, as was Sheba, a thought that made him shiver, but

he knew how that fight would end: both Alex and Lachesis dead.

Yet on another path, Kraden would die, a path Ivan had not yet seen an outcome to. Were those the only two choices open to him? Was he forced to choose between which of his friends would die?

He shook his head as he stood up, numbly thanking Atropos for speaking to him. He paused at the door, his entire body cold and unresponsive. He found himself unable to open it, unable to look at the people on the other side.

They could win the war.

But it would cost his friends their lives.

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The sun glittered upon the endless snowfields of Imil, turning the plains to diamonds. Mia stared across the snow wistfully as she walked the path to the lighthouse, a large, leather bag on her back. Even compared to the green rolling hills of Contigo, the majestic peaks of Altin, and the tropical paradise of Apojii, she found herself surprised at how much she preferred the sight of white and blue. Acres of fresh, unblemished snow lay all around her, the cold incapable of reaching her through the layers of clothing.

A snowball whizzed by her head, shattering the serenity of the walk. "If one of you hits me, you will be carrying so much water back that you won't be able to walk for three days."

A glove quickly stifled a giggle from behind her. Mia glanced over her shoulder sternly to find Justin covering Megan's mouth, somehow managing to look completely innocent and painfully guilty at the same time. She stared at them for a

few seconds, making her point silently, then turned forward again, shaking her head.

"Always such a stick in the mud," Alex murmured from beside her, not looking up from the black book he carried.

Mia snorted. "I'm not very partial to letting snow drip down into my robes. *You* know how long that takes to dry."

"I never said it was enjoyable," he said, glancing over at her with a smirk. "Only that you have such a penchant for ruining children's fun everywhere. It's always been a special talent of yours."

"And making trouble has always been one of yours," she said, shaking her head. A thousand memories instantly came to mind of her convincing Alex not to do something foolish, and a thousand more of him ignoring her warnings.

A high-pitched squeal dashed past her, and much to Mia's surprise, she found a pair of pigtails in pursuit, rather than the source. Whatever Justin did to earn the girl's sudden ferocity, he evidently had done it well; she followed him a full half-mile up the road before finally catching him, tossing the boy face-down into the snow, then sitting atop him triumphantly.

Mia laughed as she watched them wrestle shortly, before both simply flopped back into the snow, exhausted. "It's scary how much they remind me of us sometimes."

"Only when they're together," Alex said. "Justin is perfectly behaved when he's alone, but no one would ever have made the same claim of me."

"That's for certain," Mia muttered, rolling her eyes. Alex smiled, but said nothing, merely looking back down at the

book. Mia glanced over at it warily. "Have you found anything of use in there yet?"

"Not quite," he said, his mouth turning down into a frown. "I've been trying to translate it, but my memory of the tribal writing is weak. It's coming back, but slowly. I can understand a few odd spells, and a good amount of the introductory pages."

Mia peered at the pages, but saw only squiggles, occasionally accompanied by a picture. "Did that have anything interesting?"

Alex shook his head. "Not particularly. It spoke much of honoring the Great Gabomba, their local deity, and of keeping one's mind clear while invoking, so as to avoid...irrationality is the closest I can come to describing it. It also speaks of means to draw more from the surroundings, and less from the self."

"Basic Psynergy tenets, then," Mia said, recognizing some of her father's lessons in the words. Conserve energy by drawing from the natural world first. Keep the mind free of distractions for clear and potent spells. She felt confident that the book likely spoke of the dangers of overdrawing from oneself, as well.

"The book itself is rather interesting, too," he continued. "It... It almost feels like an alchemy tool, but different. Rather than a single task, I believe the book takes the input to channel the spells within, which span the elements."

Mia frowned. "I didn't think they could do that. I've never seen one that could do multiple things."

Alex shook his head, sliding his finger into the current page and holding the book up with one hand. "Nor have I, but I

believe this to be the case. I've only translated a few basic techniques, though I can't quite test my theory yet, as none of them are Mars-based."

"Are you sure it's safe?" she asked. "It won't do anyone much good if you die mysteriously, or something."

He smiled. "No, I don't sense any of the bloodlust that the sword held. I think it was simply locked up because... Well, once I understand how to read it, I suspect it *will* be dangerous...to my enemies. I can't imagine having heard stories about such a book that held useless abilities." The man eyed Mia for a moment. "You don't think I should use it."

Mia hesitated, then shook her head. "No. I'm hesitant to even use this," she said, holding up her hand, where the light-producing ring sat on her finger. "I wish we had just grabbed the sword and locked the door again."

"Your father's warning-" Alex began, but a raised hand from Mia cut him off.

"I know, most of the things there are simply dangerous in the wrong hands," she said. "I just don't like the risk we're taking, even though I know what we're up against."

Alex frowned, closing the book and placing it in a pack slung across his chest. "You're uncomfortable about it." He pursed his lips tightly for a moment. "It's not the book. It's what I can do with it. It's about Marie."

Mia looked away, not wanting him to see the guilt on her face. "I... Yes. It is."

Silence settled between the two, one that unnerved Mia. Such silences rarely occurred with her, especially with Alex.

She could almost feel his anger in the still air, coupled with frustration. He would never lash out at her, she knew; rage did not exist in the man. Even as a child, he controlled his anger fiercely, focusing it and using it towards productive ends.

After a few minutes, he spoke. "Nothing I say will convince you otherwise, I assume."

"No," Mia said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry. I miss her too, but I just can't. It feels wrong to me, like-"

"Please," Alex said gently, cutting across her words. "I accept your resolve, and will make no more attempt to sway it. In return, I request you acknowledge my own and extend me the same courtesy. We're at an impasse, and I see no way for us to resolve it. Instead, let us simply ignore it."

Mia sighed softly. She wanted to speak to him, to plead with him to give up that goal. She wanted to grab him and shake him until he understood, then hold him close until he accepted it. She wanted to-

"Justin dumped snow down my back!"

The woman resisted the urge to bury her face in her hands. "Justin..."

Before she could even give the word a moment to linger, the boy's hand snapped out, pointing at Megan. "She pushed my face into the snow first!"

"That's because you hit me in the face with a snowball!"

"You said the snow looked so pretty and that you would love to wear it!"

"I didn't mean-"

Alex appeared between the two shouting children suddenly, startling both of them into silence. "I'm sure we can all do without the theatrics, children. And while today might be a relatively sunny day, it is still *very* cold. I would also recommend waiting until the summer to get each other all wet, especially when you can't change out of your clothes for a while."

"It'll be just as cold in the summer," Justin mumbled, crossing his arms, scrunching up his face and trying to make it look like something other than a pout.

"Well, my experience with Imilian summers is limited, but I seem to remember them being significantly warmer than the winters," Alex said.

"But you've lived here until the past few years, haven't you?" Megan asked, looking up at him as he gently pushed them into walking again. "How did you miss the summers?"

Mia frowned in silence. The topic had turned to dangerous waters.

Alex seemed not to notice, or at least pretended not to. "The Mercury Clan has a long-standing tradition of sending its apprentices out into the world during the summer, the months where their skills are least required around Imil. Mia and I each spent a number of summers elsewhere."

"Wait, you went around the world when you were an apprentice?" Justin asked. "Where did you go?"

Alex sighed softly. "Let's see... Well, I made my first trip when I was eight, and-"

"Eight?" Justin nearly shouted, then whirled on Mia. "Why haven't we gone on a summer trip yet? We're almost ten!"

"I *am* ten," Megan muttered, shoving the boy to the side.

He stumbled to the side, but quickly moved back and opened his mouth again. Alex cut him off before he could start. "Because you didn't have anyone to take you. I went with your brother, Megan."

For a few moments, the only thing Mia could hear was the crunching of snow beneath their boots. "With Harry?" the young girl asked quietly.

Alex nodded. "You don't remember him, do you?"

"No," Megan said, shaking her head. "I wasn't even two. I don't even remember what he looked like."

Mia quickened her step for a second, then placed an arm around Megan's shoulder. "It's alright, that's not your fault. I don't remember what my mother looked like, either, and I was three when she died."

"In some ways, that can be it's own blessing," Alex said quietly, then raised his voice back to a normal speaking volume. "But that's not the important part. What truly matters is the legacy they leave behind, the effect they leave on those of us still here. I've been to a number of amazing places, Megan, but your brother made that the most spectacular summer I've ever experienced. Have you ever heard of the island of Nihan?"

Megan shook her head, but before she had even finished a single shake, Justin said, "Oh, I have! It's that one way to the east, right?"

Alex nodded again. "Good. Nihan is a fairly large island, but the people there don't care much for leaving it. They prefer to keep to themselves, so most people are unfamiliar with them. Harold decided that visiting such a foreign place would be good for me, since I often had difficulty in thinking creatively. I looked at everything as a process, sticking with the familiar. He believed spending time in a new culture, having to think and do everything in a new fashion, would help me."

"Did it?" Justin asked. Mia did not miss the quick glance he unintentionally threw at her, undoubtedly remembering her very similar criticism of him. She sighed to herself, knowing she would see the argument show up again in a few months, as summer approached.

Alex noticed the same, briefly catching her eyes and smiling. He winked at her so quickly she nearly missed it, an art he had perfected in his youth. "Very much so."

Mia grit her teeth together.

The man continued as if he had not noticed, a brilliant act if Mia had ever seen one. "We left a bit earlier than usual, to make up for the distance. On later trips, except for one I made to Indra, I tended to stay limited to Angara and northern Gondowan. I must say, though, when you've lived in a single town for your entire life, few things will be more memorable than your first trip."

"Weren't you scared?" Megan asked, her voice returned to its usual tone. Mia drew her arm back from the girl, before Megan could begin to shift uncomfortably and find some excuse to get herself out from beneath it.

"Not scared, per se..." Alex frowned, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Anxious would be a better word. I knew there

were dangerous things in the world, of course, but I knew Harold would protect me from them. I was more nervous about spending so much time in unfamiliar places, with unfamiliar people. I was stepping into the unknown, though I was very thankful to have a friend with me, even if I had to leave the rest behind for a while."

Mia smirked to herself. She remembered the night before Alex left that year. He had come to her room like a young child afraid of a storm, tears threatening to fall at the slightest of provocations. They sat on her bed well into the night as she held him, promising she would take care of Marie, that he absolutely should not back out of the trip. She had never spoken of that night, however, nor would she now. Some secrets had no business being revealed.

"There were so many firsts I remember," Alex continued. "My first night south of the mountains felt so strange, with no snow in sight. I'd seen a green summer a few years before, but it lasted only a week, and the clouds never left us. To see green as far as the eye can see, glowing golden in the sunlight and silver in the moonlight... What a sight, to one from a world of black, white, and blue. My first night in Bilibin, too. I had thought Imil to be the standard size of cities, but Bilibin quickly proved me wrong. Buildings sprawled out endlessly around me, sheltered behind layers of walls. I could see where the city had expanded as we went further in, finding inner walls that had no guards, abandoned in favor of the newer, outer walls."

"Why do they need walls?" Justin asked. "Are they at war with someone?"

Alex shook his head. "No, not at all. Not now, at least. Creatures further south are much less intimidated by human contact. The wolves, bears, and other animals here only

wander into the town when hunger has pushed them beyond their normal limits, but around Bilibin, they see people outside the city far more often, and thus are less afraid. Walls are necessary to keep them out. It also prevents branded thieves from re-entering the city, another problem we don't share."

Yet, Mia thought, then immediately chastised herself for the pessimistic attitude. Imil would never have bandit problems, of course. Who would go that far north just to rob people, then probably die in the snow anyway?

Then again, why would anyone try to freeze them all to death by sleep?

"I wanted to stay longer," Alex said, looking up at the empty blue sky. "There was so much to see and experience, Harold nearly had to drag me away the following morning to board our ship. He said he understood how I felt, and that we might spend a few days there on the way back, but we had to be on that ship." He paused and pulled his eyes down towards the road. "That ship... I admit, my memories of *that* portion of the trip are anything but fond."

Megan giggled and said, "You got seasick, didn't you?"

Alex shook his head slowly. "Miserably. The trip downriver was uneventful, but once we hit the open ocean, I had a week of unpleasantness awaiting me. By the time I began to adapt to it, we had arrived, but I was kept occupied for the trip. Harold sat me down on the day we departed, going over some of the more significant social taboos of their culture, then having me repeat them every morning. He wanted me to learn their other cultural habits on my own, but not at the expense of ostracizing myself. It forced me to involve myself

more thoroughly with the locals once we reached Izumo, rather than clinging to his side constantly."

"What sort of things did you do there?" Justin asked.

"Most of our time was spent learning all manners of things," Alex said. "Some I learned alone, such as local herbs and remedies from their healers, as Harold had learned them when he first visited, but others we did together, such as hunting. The wildlife on the island is significantly less dangerous than that around Imil, which made it a great place to learn basic hunting and survival skills. We also spent time learning basics of various other skills they had mastered, in the hopes of reproducing them back home, or at least putting the knowledge to good use sometime."

Alex waved his hand. "But the stories of what I learned are of no interest to you. Tell me, have you heard of fire flowers?"

Both children shook their heads this time, Mia sympathizing with them. She had never visited Nihan herself, and only knew of the fire flowers from Alex's own stories, though much later, Sheba spoke of them as well.

"Well, they are quite the sight," he said. "They're made entirely without Psynergy, though they resemble it greatly. You light a wick on them, like that on a candle, except it burns quickly. When it reaches the end, the container holding the flower flies into the air and explodes, throwing colored fire across the sky. Bright blues and greens and yellows, every color you can imagine."

"Even black?" Justin asked.

"No, not black," he said after a moment's thought. "I don't think black is possible, actually. Deep purple is, though, the color of the late evening sky. When I saw them that summer,

they only created flower shapes, but I've heard that new ways have been discovered to make other shapes."

Alex raised his face to the sky slowly, smiling. "But the fire flowers were only the beginning of a spectacular evening. Late in the trip, just under a week before we left, the people of Izumo treated us to their Festival of Stars. Every summer, they celebrate the day that two stars cross paths, destined to be together for that one day of the year. The evening starts with the fire flowers, as soon as the sky is black enough, and then lasts well into the night. Seeing the things they are capable of putting together..."

He trailed off, and Megan eventually grew impatient. "What did they do? What did you get to see?"

Alex smiled at her, then shook his head slightly. "That is something you'll have to learn for yourself, someday. I can't spoil everything, after all," he added over the childish groans that immediately followed his words.

"But when are we even going to get to *go* on a trip?" Justin whined.

Mia lightly swatted him on the backside. "What have I told you about doing that?"

He rubbed the back of his neck slightly and looked down, Megan barely keeping her wide grin from splitting her face in half beside him. "Sorry, Mia," he mumbled.

The woman rolled her eyes. "Your sincerity is flattering. And stop gloating over there, or you'll get one too," she said flatly.

Justin's moody shuffling lasted only a minute, at best, before he and Megan began a heated discussion over where they

wanted to go for their first trip, which just as quickly turned into a wildly imaginative comparison of what such places were like. Mia slowed down slightly after their conversation took off, allowing them to pull ahead, then looked over at Alex sternly.

He returned the gaze with one of utmost innocence. "What is it, my lady?"

"Do you know how long I'm going to have to hear about this?" she asked. "I'm going to spend all summer listening to the two of them complain about how they're stuck in Imil."

"Not if you take them somewhere," Alex said reasonably.

Mia opened her mouth, then shut it again. Why couldn't she take them on a trip? As Alex had pointed out, tradition stated that they should be going on one now, if they had not started already. Circumstances had forced her hand in that matter through the previous few years, of course, being the only trained healer in Imil. With Alex back, however, he could easily handle the significantly reduced workload of the summer by himself.

After all, *she* had never been to Nihan, either. If she intended to reform the Mercury Clan from four people, then all four of them needed the world experience necessary not only to train others, but for just about anything imaginable. Though Imil had no formal leadership, Imilians often came to the clan for resolution of various problems.

"I suppose I could," she said at last. "They've been helping me with so much, and they would love a trip like that. And they *could* use some different skills."

Alex nodded. "They'll need them to take over as clan leader eventually."

Mia said nothing. She rarely thought of herself as the clan leader, despite her father passing that mantle to her upon his death. Alex never disagreed with her father's decision, despite being older; he always told her that she made a better leader than he would. When the only other members had been missing or children, such a title seemed pointless.

She knew what Alex was implying, though.

When she looked over at him, she found him staring at her solemnly. "You can't stay here forever, Mia. I know you too well for that. You love helping people, and making others' lives a better place, but this has gone so far beyond it. This is less helping people and more taking care of them."

Mia met his eyes for a moment, then turned away, looking towards the lighthouse. "I... I feel guilty about it. I have my *own* life to live. I have things that *I* want to do. These people need me, but some days I just think about leaving them all here, running off and never returning."

She felt an arm gently fall across her shoulders. "That's human nature," Alex said "I don't believe anyone can live solely for other people, and you're no exception. I think the fact that you've waited this long, waiting for an opportunity to leave them in capable hands, is a testament to your selflessness. You just need to accept that no one is without vices."

Mia glanced over at him, then looked forward again. "True enough," she murmured.

Chapter 18: The Heart Never Lies

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 18 – The Heart Never Lies

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His hands curled into fists.

Laughter filled the air around Ivan. Usually it became background noise after a moment, like the cicadas of summer, a constant drone that he could only hear if he focused on it. It made the sound bearable, allowed him to ignore it and its origin more easily.

He grit his teeth behind closed lips, trying to force that sound into the back of his mind, but it had already crossed the threshold of anger, refusing to leave. His focus on the sound, willing it to fade, only kindled his irritation and frustration further. Each rise in pitch sent another sharp, red spike through his mind as his eyes drifted out of focus, unwilling to see the faces of his tormentors any longer.

One of them noticed his balled hands, idly wondering if the boy would swing. The question provoked another round of laughter from the others as they closed the circle around him.

Ivan could feel the anger welling in his mind, the heavy storm threatening to overflow the emotion and spill it everywhere. It would not be the first fight he had. He doubted it would be the last. Layana would be disappointed if she found out, but even her stern tone warbled and vanished beneath the rising tide.

With the cry of a young boy wanting to be a wild animal, Ivan lunged forward. The air went still. He did not swing, as the other boy had surmised; punching things hurt. He shoved both arms against the other boy's chest, taking a vicious pleasure in his surprised expression. When he touched the other boy, the wind howled around him briefly, whipping at his hair and clothes.

All of the other children stumbled back, buffeted by the gust, but the one Ivan touched launched back as if struck by a horse, rather than a young child. He tumbled across the cobblestones a few times before stopping, though he picked himself up quickly. His eyes had gone wide and he ignored the small cut along his forearm. The blood pooled and dripped from the wound in silence, though Ivan heard the splatter it made on the stone all too well.

The other boy spat a single word before leaving with the others.

Ivan stood rooted to the spot until they had vanished down some side street a distance away, and then he stood there still for some time after. His eyes shifted from the mouth of the street they disappeared into to the small red stain in the street before him.

His hands uncurled and fell limp.

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Garet crossed his arms. "No. Hell no. Absolutely not."

Kraden rolled his eyes. "Garet, please. I wouldn't-"

"Not a chance in hell. No way. Nuh-uh." He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the old man. "I can say 'no' in a thousand different ways. Want me to keep going?"

"Garet-"

"Nope. Not happening. Not if your life depended on it. Never gonna happen."

Kraden turned towards Isaac, pleading with the young man silently. Isaac nodded, then reached out and gently touched Garet on the shoulder.

The Martian stopped his stream, glancing over at his friend. "You're not gonna make me continue this, are you? 'Cause you know where it'll end up."

Isaac shook his head. "Think about this for a minute. Do you think I'd be any more comfortable with this than you?"

Garet stared at him for a moment, then turned away. "No. Which doesn't explain why you *look* so much more comfortable with it."

"We don't have much of a choice," Ivan said quietly, tilting his head to try and get Garet to look him in the eye, but the man steadfastly kept his gaze locked on the wall, refusing to look at him. "The thought of being alone with her terrifies me far more than it does you, trust me." He took a deep breath, closing his eyes. "But you have to go. We can't stop gathering our assets just because one of the kings moved unexpectedly. We need to react, adapt, and keep focused on our end goal."

"This isn't chess, Ivan," Garet snapped. "You aren't a pawn that we throw away so we can land a checkmate."

"No," he agreed. "I'm the knight, the one who can outmaneuver the invading queen until other pieces can get into position. We need Deadbeard, Garet, and he...doesn't

seem like the type who usually helps others. Or wants help. Just servitude."

Garet snorted, crossing his arms. "All the more reason to not bother with him, then. Too much of a risk."

"Everything we do now is a risk," Kraden said quietly.

"It'll take both of us if he fights," Isaac said from behind him. "I'd gladly do it alone if I thought it could happen peacefully, but... I need you there, Garet. I need you to watch my back, because if it comes to a fight, it'll take both of us to take him down."

He shook his head. "I can't-"

A knock on the door interrupted his words. Everyone in the study turned as one of Kraden's alchemists entered the room. "I apologize, but there's contact coming from Anemos."

Garet shared a quick glance with the others in the room, none of them surprised. Sheba had told them her friend would let them know if one of the kings left Anemos, and despite Atropos' arrival the previous night, no contact had been made yet. "I'll check it out," he said, crossing the room to the door, then pausing. "Feel free to find some other solution, in the meantime."

He followed the woman in silence, mulling over the conversation. One of Iodem's contacts had managed to find a captain willing to set out in search of Deadbeard, and arranged a departure for the following morning. The captain wanted to meet with them first, apparently to size them up and set a price for the voyage. With none of the others showing back up yet, though...

Garet felt the fierce frustration flare back up in his chest. He wanted Deadbeard on their side against the Anemoi as much as anyone, but the timing... The goddamned *timing...* Were the gods laughing at them right now? Had they irritated them so much that they simply wanted to watch the puny mortals flail about in confusion?

He would not allow that. They might be in a bad situation, but he would never let them resort to panic-led decisions. He had already brought up the idea of rescheduling their departure, but Kraden seemed doubtful of that plan. The captain they had found would evidently take the breaking of an agreement like that personally, and be unlikely to work with them again.

They would have to take their chances with that, however. Ivan was too exposed by himself, especially if they had no idea if Atropos was telling the truth, and if she was lying, what her real motives were. If they lost the opportunity to recruit Deadbeard's help, then so be it.

As they reached the lab, Garet followed the woman into it, finding several of the scholars standing nearby a table. He recognized one of the younger ones as Brennan, one of Kraden's most skilled alchemists. He glanced up, said something quietly to the others, then stepped towards Garet. "It's been resonating for several minutes now," Brennan said as he turned back around, leading Garet over to the table. "She keeps asking for Sheba."

Garet stopped at the table, picking up the small tuning fork. He twisted his hand, looking at it from all sides, as if it had instructions written on it. "Uh...hello?" he said, holding the tool up to his mouth. He pulled it back and watched it for a second, but when no response came, he glanced back at the young alchemist for help.

"It's a kind of alchemy tool," Brennan said. "Use it the same way, then talk into it."

Nodding, the Valean pushed a small portion of his will into the tuning fork. Immediately he felt it thrum in his hand, as if struck by a piece of metal. "Hello?" he said again.

"Who is this?" a woman's voice answered back immediately.

"If I said Sheba, would you believe me?" Silence answered him and he found himself unable to contain his grin. "Guess not. This is a friend of Sheba's."

"What? Where is Sheba?" the woman asked, her voice turning urgent.

Garet glanced around him and suddenly felt a bit foolish for talking to a piece of metal. Evidently no one other than the holder could hear the voice at the other end. He turned around and faced the wall, putting the curious glances of the scholars and alchemists on his back. "She went to take care of some things," he said vaguely, not wanting to announce where she had gone. "She's fine. Who is this?"

"Aisa," the woman said, then quickly continued. "She might not be fine. Or maybe she's safer now, I don't know."

"That's helpful," Garet said, rolling his eyes before he remembered she would be unable to see it. "What are you talking about?"

Aisa hesitated for a moment, then said, "My mother is missing. King Atropos. She vanished. No one knows where she is or went."

"Oh, that. She's here, actually," the man said, frowning. They didn't realize this the night before?

"What?!"

Garet winced at how loud the woman's voice echoed in his head. He felt a sharp pain settle behind his left temple. "Ow, please don't do that. But yeah, she showed up here last night."

She kept her silence as Garet outlined the king's arrival, and the reasoning she had given Ivan. "Is she... Is she alright?" Aisa asked after a long pause.

Garet nodded, then rolled his eyes at himself. "Yeah. At least, she'll live. None of it's life-threatening, and a doctor already saw to everything. Her wounds make me cringe, though."

"Where are you? I want to see her."

The Valean hesitated. Giving out their location seemed like a terrible idea. If Atropos was telling the truth, then it could bring Lachesis down onto their heads in an attempt to finish what he started. If the sounds of Clotho's battle had been any indication, the collision of those two forces would devastate an already wounded Tolbi. And after he finished with her, he, Isaac, and Ivan would be around for dessert.

If she was lying, though, then Lachesis would already know where they were, of course. In that case, why had they not simply wiped them out yet?

Sheba.

They would be waiting for Sheba.

Lurk in wait until the prize they were after showed itself, then grab her while blasting everyone else. That seemed to fit pretty well, actually, and went with Atropos' story about wanting Sheba for the purposes of peace.

The injuries failed to match the theory, though, Garet realized. Why would Atropos deliberately place herself in such pain simply to get the girl back? From his understanding, the kings wanted Sheba back because she belonged to them, more or less. It was a possessive thing. He doubted they would brutalize themselves like that simply for a trophy, or a point of pride.

So. Either Atropos had come for something else, or Sheba held some other meaning to the kings, something the girl remained in the dark about.

As for Aisa... Sheba trusted her completely, and after what she had told them of her family there, Garet doubted she would trust anyone lightly. If Aisa had no ill intentions, then she simply wanted to see her injured mother out of a daughter's concern. Lachesis would not be involved. And if Atropos *was* lying, then having her daughter here might foil whatever the woman had planned.

And in that case... Garet frowned in thought for a few moments more, then nodded at last, growing annoyed at his habit of forgetting that Aisa could not see him. "Alright. But aren't you supposed to be our contact there?"

"I'll pass that to Morta. She's already been part of it."

"Okay." Garet took a deep breath, praying he was not about to kill them all. "We're in Tolbi. The palace. Tell them Garet sent you."

"Thank you," she said, relief evident in her voice, and the tiny vibrations of the tuning fork ceased.

Garet stared at it for a moment, then placed it back on the desk, frowning. He glanced up at Brennan and nodded. "Thanks. If anyone else comes over it, let us know."

Brennan shook his head, then picked up the tool and handed it back. "Take it. We should have everything we need from it, and we're trying to make a pair right now, anyway."

The tuning fork slid into one of Garet's pockets. "What about that staff thing. Had any luck with that?"

"Yes, actually, quite a bit." he said. "The concepts proved to be fairly simple, but limited in range. Not unexpected, given the size of Anemos. We've been working on ways to increase it, and accurately."

Garet nodded, giving the alchemists his farewell, then climbing the stairs back out of the lab. He paused at the intersecting hallways, glancing back towards Kraden's study, then stepped over to a pair of guards making their rounds. "Can you guys do me a favor and deliver a pair of messages? Let Kraden know that I'm taking some alone time in my room to think about it, and let the guards at the front know I'm expecting someone, and to bring them up."

They nodded to him and he thanked them, turning around. If he walked back in there now, he would probably just start shouting, even if he thought he found a solution. Hell, *they* might start shouting at *him,* he realized. The thought made him grin.

When he reached his room, he kicked off his boots and dropped on his stomach onto his bed, burying his face into his pillow, relishing the comfortable smothering.

A knock on the door forced his head back up. He started to grumble to himself about never getting a moment to himself when he noticed his slightly blurred vision and the dried drool on the corner of his mouth. Sleep had not surprised him like that in some time.

He pushed himself from the bed, stepped into his boots, and opened the door, finding a young woman standing in front of him, not much older than he. His eyes flickered over her blond hair and light eyes, finding them very familiar. "You're Aisa."

She nodded. "I am. You must be Garet."

"Yep." He stepped outside and shut the door behind him. "I'm guessing you want to see your mother." Without waiting for an answer, he stepped past the woman and motioned for her to follow.

Aisa followed him in silence, earning herself little more than a quick glance from anyone they passed. Garet supposed people would never really recognize an Anemian, not without the green hair. Even then, though, how many people knew it to be a trademark of Anemos?

He nodded to the guard outside Atropos' door and stepped in after Aisa. The king had sat up a bit farther in her bed, propped up with another pillow, though the curtains remained open, flooding the room with the late afternoon light.

Atropos turned her head as the door shut, her eyes settling on her daughter immediately. For a moment she simply stared at Aisa, her face as blank as the remainder of the room, but before she could say anything, the young woman threw herself to the bed. She collapsed partially on it, her arms flying around her mother's neck.

"I was so worried about you, mother," she said.

Garet did not miss the slight stutter in her words, caught in the raw emotion pouring from her voice. He looked away from the reunion, glancing around the rest of the room,

scanning for anything that might have been left in it. They had thoroughly cleaned it of everything bar the furniture already, but he found the urge to inspect it again undeniable.

Despite how infrequently he read, and how much he argued with Ivan about what a waste of space such large bookshelves were, he still found the empty shelves that towered over him eerie. They were not meant to look so barren. The desk gave the same impression, void of anything that one might use at a desk. Only the chair remained, slid beneath it snugly.

He pulled that out and seated himself in the corner, keeping both mother and daughter in his sight. He had no particular desire to listen in on their conversation, but the limited distance made such a desire irrelevant.

Their conversation covered most of the same points that Ivan's had earlier that morning. He kept his ears open during that, but everything Atropos said matched what she had told them. Once Aisa satisfied herself with the details, the room fell quiet as she simply sat, holding her mother's hand within her own.

After giving them a respectful time together, Garet stood up and cleared his throat. Aisa looked up at him and nodded, then turned back to her mother. "I'm here for you, mother. Just send for me."

When Garet opened the door again, he found Isaac standing in the hallway, a confused expression on his face. As Aisa emerged behind him, the expression grew deeper, then collapsed into anger. "Garet... You..."

He gestured sharply for Isaac to be quiet, then shut the door. "Study. Go."

Isaac frowned, grit his teeth, and practically stomped off towards Kraden's study. Ivan, who had been only a short distance down the hall, cast a questioning glance at Garet. When the Valean returned the look with a steady stare, Ivan nodded slightly, following behind Isaac.

Garet watched them go, then turned back to Aisa. "We need to have a talk together. All of us. I, uh...didn't really ask anyone before telling you where we were."

Understanding dawned on Aisa's face immediately. "They don't trust me."

"They don't know what the hell's going on," Garet said with a shrug, then began to walk down the hall as well. "But I'm letting you know ahead of time, so you aren't surprised: I didn't do this entirely for you."

The woman nodded and said nothing, following him to the study. Garet paused at the door to let her in first, then ensured it was firmly shut behind him.

Three pairs of eyes met him when he turned around, all holding varying degrees of accusation. "Okay, look," he began, holding his hands up. "I can explain."

"For starters, I think we could use some introductions," Kraden said, his voice stern. "Miss Urania, I presume. To which prince do we have the honor of speaking to?"

"I am Aisa," she said, bowing deeply to the scholar. As she stood back up, she pushed her braid back over her shoulder from where it had fallen. "I am assuming you are more of Sheba's friends?"

Isaac opened his mouth to say something, but Garet recognized the fire in his expression all too well and cut him

off. "Okay, screw introductions, I'm not gonna sit here and dance around this all day. Look," he said, glancing at the other three, "Sheba trusts her. Since she's hardly a stranger to being held prisoner, I think I'll take her judgment on who's trustworthy. Aisa wanted to see her mother, so I told her to come here. At least I can repay the favor she did for Sheba."

He turned back to the Anemian prince. "Hard truth: I trust *you,* but not your mother. I don't know what's going on here. She claims your other king attacked her, and while it looks that way, I'm not in the business of trusting people without a good reason. Personally, I think she's waiting here for Sheba to get back, so she can whisk her away again. I'm not about to let that happen."

Garet spun to Ivan, pointing a finger threateningly at the young man. "You need to be alert. If Sheba shows back up here, you need to be the first to know, and you need to keep it from everyone else. *Everyone.* Atropos cannot know where she is. You," he turned to Aisa again. "You're here partially as a safeguard against your mother. If she's telling the truth, fine, no harm done. If she's not, she'll reconsider whatever she's got planned now that she knows you're here."

Aisa frowned. "Are you telling me I'm your prisoner?"

"No," Garet said, shaking his head. "I'm not stopping you from leaving. I know you probably believe your mother's story, because honestly, I'd be more surprised if you came all the way here and didn't. I'm not asking you to do anything against her. I'm just asking you to stick around for a bit, to make us feel better about everything."

The woman stared at him for a moment, but before she could reply, Kraden said, "Then...have you reconsidered our

plan?"

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Despite my gut saying you're stupid... Yeah. If Aisa's here with Ivan, I'll do it."

"Garet..." Ivan shifted slightly in his chair. "Are you sure?"

"If I wasn't sure, I wouldn't have said it." He opened his eyes and turned to Aisa. "Look, long story short, me and Isaac over there have to leave on some whole 'saving the world' business, and at the moment, Ivan and Kraden are the only ones left here with your mother. Imagine how much I like this deal. I'm not asking you to do anything that would harm your mother. I just need you to hang around and play along for a bit. She can't know we're gone. Ivan's been the only one to talk to her, anyway, so if no one tells her, she won't even notice. Please."

Aisa stared at him again, and this time, no one interrupted. She flicked her eyes over to Ivan, then to Isaac, who Garet was relieved to see had cooled down significantly. When they returned to Garet, she sighed slightly. "Alright. I'll stay. But if I feel like my mother's life is in danger, I will take her and leave without a second thought. Understand?"

Garet nodded. "If that happens, then I'd rather you did. If she's on our side, then I want her alive to help us take down this other king. I think we're gonna need all the help we can get."

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The ringing of hammers upon steel echoed endlessly throughout the chamber, one after the other. The stones of the lighthouse's walls channeled sound as well as they did heat, reflecting the sounds as easily as the hammers

reflected the flickering firelight. The chamber reminded Piers very strongly of an amphitheater, though he suspected any of the rooms in the lighthouse would have acted similarly.

The Lemurian glanced back at the three Proxians, then swept his gaze across the room as he stepped down the stairs. He originally had concerns about helping with the sword's construction; he knew nothing about forging a blade, save a very basic idea of the process. The last thing he wanted was to slow Einion down, but the smith had no intention of using him for that. Not wanting to chance another explosion in the chamber, he placed Piers on guard duty, freeing them to focus entirely on the sword.

He believed the stairs at the end of the hall to be the only entrance to the chamber, but he knew how quickly complacency could turn to disaster. His route, though a static one after the first hour, never ceased, carrying him in a doubled perimeter around the smiths.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs, the hammers fell silent, casting an eerie calm over the room. Piers glanced back to find Einion speaking to his apprentices, but he could only hear the low rumble of his voice, not the words. The two boys nodded, laying their hammers down as Einion walked away from the forge. He moved down the steps towards Piers, answering the man's questioning expression. "They need a short a break. Striking's hard, even with two."

Piers nodded, then stepped up the stairs slightly, seating himself near the top, where he could see the majority of the chamber with a turn of his head. "There is far more to making a sword that I imagined," he admitted, shaking his head. "Though I supposed I never thought about it much."

"Most don't," Einion said, seating himself next to the Lemurian. "A lot of it will be skipped, though. It'll just be reforged again, no need to waste time making it sharp and pretty."

Piers nodded. He had spoken to the blacksmith about the blade's ultimate purpose once they had reached the lighthouse while his apprentices moved about, setting up their makeshift forge. The man seemed slightly disappointed that his sword was destined only to create *another* sword, but it quickly vanished.

His apprentices seemed less keen on the idea, when he then spoke to them, but after a sharp word from the smith, their displeasure disappeared as well. Vocally, at least; Piers could still see a slight annoyance in their expressions.

"Why did we come all the way down here?" Piers asked after a short while of silence. Solid as Einion appeared, he knew the man needed a pause as well, and had no desire to rob him of his ability to catch his breath. "The energy of the lighthouse is strongest at the beacon."

Einion raised an eyebrow. "Forges don't work too well outside."

Piers paused. "Well... No, I suppose not. We moved opposite, though. Would not have simply a higher level of the lighthouse served better than the very- the *almost* bottom?" he amended.

No answer came for a long time. Einion sat still for a minute, then reached into his pack and pulled out some jerky, tearing off pieces and splitting it with Piers. The man accepted it gratefully, but did not press the Proxian for an answer. If Einion had not wanted to answer it, he would have said so.

A short distance away, Piers heard Liam and Terandi marveling at the dragon statues in the chamber in hushed tones, like children speaking to each other instead of sleeping. He could not make out their exact words, but their tones conveyed everything necessary for understanding. They had never visited the lighthouse, after all, and even Piers had found the structure spectacular on his first visit, despite all the architectural marvels he had seen.

He could only imagine how it must seem to a pair of young Proxians, however. To have grown up with it being nothing more than a distant landmark, visible only on the rare occasions that gifted them with clear skies, only to see it light up and become the literal beacon of their lives once more? That light meant life to Prox, in a manner that Lemuria had never needed to worry about.

The closest he could come to a comparison was their spring, that which provided them with their extensive lifespans. He tried to imagine what it would be like to have lived during the time of its construction, but found the sensation foreign, still. Mia would understand it, he knew. After all, she had experienced a near identical situation with her own lighthouse, by way of the fountain at its base.

"The energy of the lighthouse is enough. Location doesn't matter. What matters is honoring those left in this hall."

Piers turned back to Einion, suppressing a shiver. He had little trouble recalling that night, leaving the two bodies at the end of the chamber. They had wanted to take them, to ensure a proper burial, but by the time they could return from Prox, the lighthouse's scavengers had made away with them, leaving nothing but a pair of dried bloodstains on the floor.

No one in Prox had blamed them for that choice, of course. They knew well that the lives of the living should always come before the honor of the dead. And really, to have been killed by one of Tiamat's dragons? No honor they could show would match that bestowed by the goddess herself.

Piers could not suppress the shiver this time, even with the warmth of the chamber pressing in around him.

It did not go unnoticed. "You alright?" Einion asked.

The Lemurian opened his mouth momentarily, then closed it again, debating himself for a long moment. "I'll be alright," he said at last. "I...am not very comfortable with death. I never have been."

Einion grunted in a low tone, noticeably different than the one he used for humor. "Forgot others don't see it as much as us."

Piers nodded slowly. "My people live to be over a thousand years old. We almost never see a death. They're... They're very shocking and disturbing to us."

"Nothing new up here," Einion said. "Charon lives in our houses. He delivers our children, feeds them, teaches them, and if they're lucky, he waits a bit before taking them." The man glanced over at the Lemurian. "You lose someone close?"

"My mother, most recently," he said quietly, looking down at his hands. "My father went some time before that, and my only remaining family will follow shortly."

"No siblings?" Einion asked. When Piers shook his head, he grunted again. "Only my sister and me survived. Lost two brothers, one during birth, and one on a hunting trip. Was

only a few years old when that happened. Don't remember him at all. Lost my parents some time ago. Even lost a nephew last year," he added, scratching one of his blue cheeks. "He was a good man. Best fighter we've had in a while."

Piers stared at the man in disbelief. "You've...lost that many?"

"Most families bury more than they feed," Einion said impassively. Piers could not help but admire the man's solidarity, even given their different views on the subject. To have lost so many family members, even if he never knew some of them...

The more he thought about it, the more he realized that few Proxian families had single children, from what he had seen. In fact, many seemed to not only have two, but three. Though he had known about Prox's high death rate, he never made the connection between it and family size. Obviously, they would need a higher birth rate to compensate.

Some part of him had known it, he realized, but raw information and statistics never impacted the same as personal information. Knowing that Einion, himself, had lost so many members of his family... For a moment he felt a bit foolish, trying to compare his losses to those Einion had suffered, but the rational part of his mind quickly chastised him for the thought. They treated death differently, like many other things, and he knew the losses had struck both of them hard. Whereas the Proxian had expected it, however, the news continued to blindside Piers at every turn.

Lemurians had little in the way of honoring their dead, which Felix had found odd when they discussed it one night, around their campfire. He understood how abhorrent an idea death was to them, at the idea of so much wasted life, but he expected their people to have elaborate ceremonies to accompany the passing.

Just the opposite, in fact, Piers had explained. They disliked and feared death, feared what it might do to them. It made them incomparably uncomfortable. Funerals were a quick affair, generally nothing more than a burial and short word from family and close friends, lest Charon turn his eye upon them next.

Prox, evidently, likewise moved in an unexpected direction. "I don't mean any offense by the question," he asked slowly, "but if you lose so many people, and so frequently, why do you spend so much effort to honor them?"

Einion glanced over at him, a confused expression on his face, but it smoothed out in a few seconds. "Honor the life they should've had. Honor what they did with the time they did have." He frowned in silence for a moment. "And maybe to make us feel better about it."

"How so?" Piers asked.

"We all die," Einion said. "Some sooner. Comforts people to know others will have a big gathering in remembrance. Makes them feel that their lives weren't wasted. We even do the same for enemies, where we can."

Piers looked away, his eyes dropping to the bottom of the stairs. "Truly? Most cultures only make the barest of concessions towards their enemy's dead."

Einion nodded. "No enemies on the Styx. They get full funerals, for those that don't get returned home. If they were strong, the one who killed them often held a feast in their honor. Sometimes wrote a song or something. We've got as many stories about our foes as our heroes."

"You're...comfortable with the idea of killing others?" Piers asked, glancing up again.

Shrugging, Einion said, "Comfort doesn't matter. Living involves killing. Most of the time it's not people, but only the lucky and the unlucky keep that forever. It bother you?"

"I have killed many creatures since leaving Lemuria, either for food or for defense. I feel regret in doing so, but recognize it as necessary. When it comes to another person, however..." Piers shook his head. "I find the very idea repulsive. It's ingrained into me. It makes me nauseous, even if in defense. Even if justified."

"Not supposed to be easy," Einion murmured.

"No, but...even worse is to lie about it, especially to yourself." The man looked down at his palms, expecting to see the blood stained on them. "I left a man I had defeated trapped in a hopeless situation, telling myself that since I did not deal the killing blow, his death was not on my hands."

Einion looked at him carefully. "Still telling yourself that?"

The Lemurian shook his head again. "It eats at me, when I lie down at night. I tried to ignore it, but the conscience has a powerful voice, and for good reason. Ignoring it places one's sanity and humanity at risk."

"Did he deserve it?" Einion asked after a moment.

Piers thought about the question for several minutes, Einion waiting as patiently for an answer as Piers had before. Virote had been a good sailor in the months prior. He worked hard, helped his shipmates where he could, and seemed eager to help Piers find work for them.

The betrayal had not been uncharacteristic, though, looking back. Virote held a strong sense of justifying the means with the end, trying to convince Piers of several...less scrupulous means of establishing trade routes. He frequently spoke lovingly of the ship he someday hoped to own, and of the crew that he would manage when the time came, both speaking highly of the man's ambition. Disagreements with Piers had grown more common in the months before the mutiny.

And at the end of it all, when he had been cornered, the only thing that held him to his ways was fear - fear of death.

"Some might say yes," Piers said at last, looking up at one of the dragon statues. "I am not one of those people. I don't know if I could ever say that someone deserved death. It would have been justified, perhaps, given that he had fought to kill me. But deserved? I cannot say."

Piers looked down again, then stood up and turned to stand in front of Einion. "I was not honoring his death by lying about the circumstances. I don't think the dead can truly be honored with such a lie. He...is not the only person that I have failed to honor properly."

Einion stared at him impassively, reminding him eerily of Felix. He would need to apologize to him later, Piers supposed. In the meantime, however, he fell to one knee, bowing his head before Einion. "Agatio and Karst were not slain by a dragon. Not wholly. The dragon made from the

Valeans was not the only transformation that day. The gods warped those two as well, drawing their draconian blood out and giving it form. When we encountered them..." Piers paused. "Neither of our groups recognized the other. Not until the battle was over."

Silence settled into the chamber once more. Even Terandi and Liam were silent, though Piers knew the two boys were not within hearing distance. He closed his eyes and the sound of a roar sliding into a scream of pain filled his ears once more. Few of their group expressed more than a momentary concern for the pair, as their transformation wore off. He could hardly blame them; Karst had nearly succeeded in killing Isaac's group, and then she and Agatio had tried to kill both Felix and himself.

And yet, even with the memory of Agatio's fire scorching his skin, Piers remembered the horror that sank in his stomach like a rock as he realized they would not live to see the beacon's fire. Jenna and Sheba kept their lack of concern well-hidden, a testament of their devotion to Felix, the only one who cared about the people *behind* the death, the people he had known in Prox.

"I understood why they did what they did on Jupiter," he later told Piers quietly. "They thought I would place their home in danger, and they zealously fought to protect it. I can't say I would have done things differently had our roles been reversed."

He had not been the one to suggest the idea of lying, of course. Felix had resolved himself to a lot of hatred from several groups of people by that point; he would have told the Proxians the truth, quietly accepted their rage and despair, then vanished from their city forever.

No one had suggested it, actually. None of them spoke of that tragic meeting until they reached Prox, met by the tearful cheers of its people. Before anyone could answer honestly when asked about the two missing Proxians, before a hesitant pause could even suggest a lie, Jenna told them all about the dragon. She described it breathlessly, awe and horror flitting across her face at the appropriate moments. She told how they had arrived in time to prevent it from devouring its prey, allowing Felix to slay the beast.

Dragonslayer. The Proxians whispered the word to each other quietly, no one having seen, let alone killed, a dragon in generations. They once honored such warriors above all else. To meet a dragon in combat was to be blessed by Tiamat; to defeat one was to be chosen by her. A vassal of the Queen of Dragons, the Mother of the North.

None of them contradicted her. Piers could see the fury erupt in Felix's eyes as she spoke, but by the time they managed to be alone, it had faded. He understood. That was what he did, after all.

"Do you want the others to know?"

Piers opened his eyes again, looking up at Einion. "I...don't know. If you asked me before we returned, I would say they deserved the truth. But now..." He sighed softly. "They've been hailed as even greater heroes now. The lie has lingered for so long that to destroy it might cause a terrible backlash."

Einion waited patiently, and finally Piers shook his head. "I cannot say. You know your people better than I do. I leave that decision up to your judgment."

The smith nodded, then stood up. "I'll think on it. Terry! Liam! Back to work!"

The metallic rings filled the chamber once more a few moments later, methodically steady.

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The last remnants of the sun dipped behind the mountains to the west. Felix watched it go silently, thankful to no longer have that burning eye glaring at him, making him sweat uncomfortably beneath its unflinching gaze. Summer had always been his least favorite of the seasons as a child, though Laliveran winters proved a capable match for Valean summers.

Remnants of the sun's light stretched across the sky along the clouds. Pink and orange rippled out from where it had vanished, painting a colorful halo around the mountains.

He tried to think of the last time he had been able to simply sit like this and watch a sunset. Months? Must have been. He could not remember doing so in Kalay, where he had spent the past several. Hammet kept him plenty busy while he worked there, caravans always arriving and leaving. Tolbi, then? Likely. From his patience in acting, despite how thrilled he was to make use of Alchemy's benefits, Felix wondered if Kraden had found a secret reservoir of Babi's draught, forgotten by the former Lord of Tolbi. Work for Kraden always moved slowly, the man never trying to rush things.

As if to confirm his thoughts, the image of the city, still unblemished at the time, crept into the forefront of his mind. He could see the white stone structures sprawled endlessly towards the horizon, a testament of the city's status as the world's largest. The fading light shone off the buildings like newly fallen snow, making them glow with an ethereal radiance.

Lalivero could not be more different, he realized. The buildings matched the colors of the sand and rock, courtesy of the clay they were wrought from. When he glanced around, he could easily see the borders of the small town, though the farmlands scattered off in every direction, reaching even farther than Tolbi's walls.

"What's the matter?"

Felix's eyes shifted to the boy sitting beside him on the roof, legs dangling over the side. "Hmm?"

"You were looking all around like you were looking for something," Javen said. "What was it?"

"Nothing in particular," Felix said, smiling warmly at the boy. "I was just thinking about how there's a lot more to your town than I first thought. You have the walls here, but all those farms are part of Lalivero too, aren't they?"

Javen nodded, looking past Felix towards the distant yellow star. "Yep. They go all the way to the lighthouse. Both of them, actually."

Felix glanced over the boy, the partially constructed tower easily visible. What would Lalivero do with it, he wondered? He knew they held nothing but contempt and disdain for the structure, and he could not blame them. Even with Kraden in charge of Tolbi and with Sheba vouching for his benevolence, they still refused any kind of trade with the city.

Which, given that mountains and desert had effectively turned Lalivero into an island, seemed more like a matter of principle to Felix. The cliffs surrounding the area would make travel by sea near impossible, as well, but Lalivero was accustomed to such isolation.

Still, though. If Kraden succeeded in eventually opening the Karagol to the Great Eastern Sea, a lighthouse on the coast could prevent a lot of unnecessary shipwrecks in bad weather. What would it take to convince the people of Lalivero of the idea's merits, though?

A thought for later, he supposed, once he could sit down with Piers and Kraden. For a man who had lived his entire life on an island, Piers had an uncanny talent for knowing exactly how to nudge people in order to get them to do what he wanted. Jenna frequently professed her apprenticeship to him in the art of manipulation, hoping he would teach her all his secret tricks. She often claimed him to rival Alex, though in a considerably nicer fashion.

"How do you know Alex wasn't simply a pawn Hydros and I used to facilitate the breaking of Alchemy's seal?" Piers asked, solemnly staring at Jenna long enough for the grin to drop from her face, replaced by a thoughtful frown.

The scent of fish wafted out from the window beneath him, remnants of the dinner Zahara had made. It again triggered that common conflict between his mouth and his stomach, as the two argued heatedly over whether or not he wanted more. In the end, however, his stomach always won, usually with the assistance of his mind. Overeating left him groggy and unresponsive, a dangerous state to be in.

He tried to ignore the smell, looking out over Lalivero again. He could see lanterns being lit around the town as the evening grew darker. A gentle breeze rustled the trees and sparse grass, and beyond the walls he could see the sand swirl about across the road, threatening to bury it if left untended.

One thing about the town still confused him, though. "Why is the water purple, Javen?" he asked. "I've never seen purple water before."

The boy wrinkled up his nose. "Ew, that would be gross! Our water's not purple, that's just the stone."

"I haven't seen many purple stones, either," Felix said. Psynergy Stones were purple, of course, but he felt none of the energy contained in them from the ground here.

"They're from the lighthouse," Javen said, then gestured south. "That one, I mean. They don't really let water get between them, so we can make little rivers and pools out of them."

Interesting, Felix thought to himself. If they were from the area around the lighthouse, it was entirely possible they had absorbed some latent Venus Psynergy. It sounded like they bonded well with whatever mortar was used, perhaps one made from the same material, to create solid seals. Did they use their pools for drinking water? If so, how did they ensure such stagnant water did not become dangerous?

The sound of feet scraping on a ladder scattered Felix's thoughts as he glanced over his shoulder across the roof, finding Faran stepping out onto it. Javen leaned back, waving at his father upside-down.

"Sheba was wondering where you were," Faran said with a smile.

Javen's arms windmilled slightly as he rolled over, pushing himself to his feet and scampering for the ladder. He vanished down into the house in one smooth motion, landing on the floor with a solid thump. Zahara's voice

echoed up out of the hole as she chastised him to not slide down like that.

Faran watched the boy go, then moved to the edge of the house, beside Felix. He did not sit down. For a long time, he did not say anything, either.

Felix did not press him. The man had lingered once dinner had finished, so that he and his wife could speak to Sheba, Felix assumed. They would not have wanted to talk about the future the night before, he knew, lest it spoil her return, but eventually, the talk had to happen.

Sheba's father was intelligent, though, Felix had seen that well enough. He knew Sheba would leave, regardless of what he said. But he truly loved her, which Felix could also see well. He raised her as if she had been born to him and Zahara, and if he had to watch her leave, then he would ensure she had his full support.

He suspected that the biggest obstacle to Faran was needing to rationalize it to himself, to put aside his emotion and think with his mind, rather than his heart. Felix knew how difficult such a task could prove. One could only do it himself, though. No amount of convincing from others could force that choice on someone; more often than not, attempts to sway another would backfire, pushing them in the opposite direction.

So he waited for Faran to speak, which the man eventually did.

"Sheba told us about...about what happened in Anemos," he said.

Felix said nothing, continuing to stare out at the mountains as shadows crept down their faces.

"Before I say anything else, I first want to thank you," Faran said quietly. "Without you, I would probably have never seen my daughter again. And...because of that, I owe you an apology.

Felix turned around at that. He had not expected an apology from the man, nor had he really needed one. He understood his actions and their reasons. Faran had not made them irrationally, nor had he projected an unnecessary hatred towards Felix while making them. They were calculated carefully to maximize his daughter's safety, and Felix respected that.

"I knew that if you showed up, Sheba would follow you. When I said she would follow you over the Falls, you told me you would do the same." Faran paused. "I didn't disbelieve you, but it wasn't until now that I *knew.* It...changed a few things for me, having that sure knowledge, instead of faith."

"Faith is powerful," Felix said. "Faith tempered by experience is near indomitable."

Faran nodded. "I love my little girl. Sincerity isn't enough for me to gamble with her life. Nothing is." He paused again, then moved to the edge of the house, seating himself beside Felix. "But she's not a little girl anymore. She's starting to make her own decisions about her life, about who she wants to be, and I don't have any right to stop her from doing that. But no matter what, even if she's no longer a little girl, she will always be *my* little girl. Do you understand?"

Felix knew how incommunicable some feelings were, ones that could only be truly understood by someone who shared the same situation. He had no children, however. He had no way to truly grasp the full enormity of Faran's feelings, so he

said, "No, not as a father. But as a brother... It's not quite the same, but I understand that."

A stream of giggles drifted up to the roof from below, though Felix could not say from who. For having no blood relation, the similarities between Sheba and Javen were uncanny.

"She means to fight, doesn't she?" Faran asked, then shook his head. "Of course she does. She was confrontational before she could even say the word."

"Her time in Anemos helped her, in some ways," Felix said. "For a while, she was concerned that her people were nothing more than violent warmongers, but the truth has settled her feelings considerably. Things aren't as bad as she feared, and that gives her hope."

Faran smiled, looking down towards the ground. "She always hated being alone. She thrives off of people too much. Finding support in her people, finding out she wasn't alone..." He paused, then snorted. "Her people. That still seems strange to me."

Felix nodded. "When we first learned of the Anemoi, of the legendary city in the sky, she felt so sure that explained everything. I never believed it. I never thought such a story was possible. A flying city? A baby falling all that way and landing unharmed? Imagine my surprise when all the stories I had discounted as myths and exaggerations proved true."

"Not just that," Faran said, shaking his head again. "For so long, her origin never mattered to us. She was our daughter. She was Laliveran. Thinking of her as Anemian... My mind wants to correct itself. She isn't even sure what to call herself anymore. She wants to be a part of their culture, too, now that she's met them."

"She wants to help them," Felix said. "She wants to stop the kings more than any of us, now."

"What about after?" Faran asked. "Will she rule? Do you think she'll take up her throne?"

Frowning, Felix said, "Their method of succession is odd. There's a possibility she wouldn't even be able to ascend, actually. But... Yes. I think she would. I don't think she knows it yet, but she will."

Faran leaned back onto his hands, turning his face up to the darkening sky. "Queen Sheba... It has an oddly fitting ring to it."

Felix did not tell the man that it would actually be King Sheba. He had no desire to explain the gender-neutral titles, nor did he wish to annoy Faran by correcting him. "I think she'll make a good ruler," he said instead. "She has a kind and stubborn heart, but she's earned an appreciation for serious situations. There's a lot more to ruling than intent, of course, but she's very smart. She'll learn."

The other man laughed quietly. "And I here I was thinking I was raising her to rule Lalivero. I don't know whether I'm more proud, or more afraid."

"Both in equal parts," Felix murmured. "For me, at least. The Sheba I rescued in Suhalla Desert would have leapt at the chance to rule an ancient kingdom. She's...grown a lot since then."

Would that Sheba have fought against the kings, as well? Yes, he supposed so. She would have done many things the same, but for entirely different reasons. The girl had been obsessed with proving herself when they met, eager to show the world that she wasn't just a little girl, that she was a

Child of the Gods, someone they should respect. Felix still spotted pieces of it, but the desire had largely faded.

Faran was right: she was no longer a little girl.

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Isaac glanced down into his mug, swirling the liquid inside and watching it spin. He never particularly cared much for the kind of drinks served in pubs, but Garet ordered him one anyway, pointing out that it would look awkward if he drank nothing. He reluctantly took the drink, working through it at the same speed he would have gone through medicine as a child, if his mother had not been watching.

The Docks were technically considered a part of the city of Tolbi, though the distance between them had grown the port into a small town of its own. They had spent the previous evening looking around, never previously having a reason to stay in the area.

Pubs and inns lined every street, of course, the most prominent business of a transit town. Kraden's man had booked them rooms at one of the older establishments, the Hand of Gold. Apparently, it was one of the few that predated Babi's reign, something that only the books remembered.

Several...less reputable establishments filled in the gaps between them, as well. As several whistles and calls drifted down to them from second story windows as they walked, Isaac found himself thankful that Ivan had not come.

He swirled the drink again, wondering why, though. He tried to imagine how he would have felt if Sheba had been there, but the moment his imagination placed her with them, her hands landed on her hips, her eyebrow cocked up, and she

shot off some sarcastic comment or question up at the women.

...Weyard really could not handle a second Jenna.

He tried Mia instead. Her face twisted into one of annoyance and disappointment as she flicked her eyes up, though it drifted towards pity rather quickly. The only verbal recognition she gave was a brief sigh, however, moving on with whatever conversation was taking place.

Why, then, did it bother him so much to imagine Ivan there? He could practically see the boy look up in confusion, before quickly dropping his gaze and turning red. He clamped his mouth shut, only speaking about a completely unrelated subject, save the inevitable spluttering when Garet noticed his reaction and began prodding him about it.

Both Ivan and Mia would be uncomfortable in the situation, though for different reasons. What made Ivan's reaction something so undesirable to Isaac? Why did he feel so much worse imagining Ivan being there?

Something tickled the back of his mind, a stray thought picked up by his subconscious, related to his train of thought, but indirectly. Like trying to remember a dream upon waking, he followed it with his attention, trying to focus on that small sensation and dwell on it long enough to bring it to the forefront of his mind. As with dreams, however, looking for it only made it vanish, leaving the young man slightly annoyed.

His annoyance was interrupted by a woman leaning onto the circular table heavily, staring at him intently as her long, brown hair swung around her face. "You the ones from Lord Kraden?"

Isaac blinked at her in response, feeling a bit like a meal under her dark eyes. "Uh... Yes, that's us."

She grunted. "And you're after Deadbeard, right?" The woman shook her head and stood upright again. "I'll be right back. I'm gonna need a drink for this."

As she walked towards the bar, Garet glanced over at Isaac, grinning widely. "I like her already."

"Not surprising," Isaac said, rolling his eyes, then nodded at Garet's mug. "How many of those have you gone through, already?

Garet mimicked Isaac's position, leaning his head onto one hand, then rolled his eyes, as well. "Not enough, apparently. Nothing's spinning yet."

Isaac rolled his eyes again. "How terrible. Isn't having so many different kinds supposed to be worse, anyway?"

Much to Isaac's surprise, Garet did not follow on with another eye roll, as he expected. Instead, the man pulled his mug slightly closer to himself as he glanced away. "I'll be fine, I know my limits."

Leaning forward slightly, Isaac narrowed his eyes. "You've had a different drink each time, and they've all been fairly small. You never get small mugs. What's going on?"

"Don't worry about it," Garet said, still not looking at Isaac. "It's personal."

Isaac frowned, but dropped the subject. Whatever meaning it had to Garet, prying never made the man share information, so there was no point in pressing him. Once he got bored of clamming up, he would simply shout something

embarrassing. *He* had not been bothered by all the glances after loudly rejecting an invitation from Mia to join her crew of male street-walkers, after all.

She had not been amused.

The thunk of another mug hitting the table banished the suspicion from Isaac's mind. He glanced over at the woman as she seated herself silently, taking a large swallow afterward. "Alright. Let's talk."

Isaac glanced sideways at Garet, who simply raised his eyebrows slightly. "Uh... Well, I'm Isaac, and this-"

"I know who you are," she snapped. "Everyone in Tolbi who isn't an idiot knows who you are." She stared at Isaac for a moment, leaving the implied question unasked.

He found himself reminded of the Proxian, Madrona. Why did he only seem to deal with incredibly aggressive women? "Well... We don't know who you are. I'm assuming you're our captain?"

She grunted once, flicking her eyes to Garet, then leaning back in her chair. "The name's Rachel. And no. I'm the first mate. The captain's out dealing with supplies."

Garet frowned. "Isn't that usually the first mate's job, though? It seems odd that the captain wouldn't want to meet us for a trip like this."

Shrugging, Rachel said, "He's a good leader. He's more interested in training people to think for themselves. But since you obviously don't trust me..." She pushed herself away from the table and stood up, grabbing her drink.

She's playing us, Isaac realized, remember the lessons Ivan had taught them about haggling. *She already knows no one else will take this job, so she's trying to see just how desperate we are.* He knew Kraden had blessed them with a more or less bottomless budget to do this, but Isaac had not quite yet reached the point where he wanted to make use of that. Tolbi would need the money to rebuild, as well.

If she wanted to put on some kind of tough act, fine. Isaac leaned back in his chair as Rachel turned away, picking up his drink and swirling it again. "That's probably for the best. I'm not sure I want to sail with someone who sends a woman to deal."

The woman stopped. Garet stared at Isaac, his face unable to decide between confusion and surprise. Fortunately, when Rachel turned back around, her eyes locked firmly on Isaac. She stepped back to the table slowly, her face a perfect mask of serenity. As she leaned onto it again, though far more gently than the first time, Isaac did not miss the way her fingers turned white as they pressed into the wood. "Excuse me?" she said, barely loud enough for Isaac to hear.

He resisted the urge to recoil from her deathly calm gaze, knowing to do so would ruin his own bluff. On the other hand, though, he felt disaster perilously close. So he shrugged as nonchalantly as possible. "How else am I supposed to take this? I'm hesitant enough to do so when he takes a..." Isaac paused for a fraction of a second, deciding that his original choice of word might see her fist in his face before he could finish the sentence, "...woman for a first mate, but I can look past that. Perhaps you really do know what you're doing. But to send you to us while he does mundane work that any deck hand with a list can do? He either doesn't think we deserve the time of day, or he's a complete idiot."

Before Isaac could even consider moving, the woman had shoved the table aside with one hand, the other closing around his throat. With a surprising display of strength, she picked Isaac up onto the tips of his boots, the calm mask dissolving into anger.

"Rachel! You can't choke everyone who shows you some teeth."

The hand loosened immediately, dropping Isaac back to his feet. He reflexively moved one hand up to rub at his neck as he took a step back, glancing around first for Garet. The Mars Adept was just standing to his feet from where the sudden movement of the table had knocked him and his chair over.

Isaac's eyes shifted to his other side, frowning as he located the speaker sliding out of a side booth and stepping towards them. "You... I know you."

The man ran a hand over his bald head, his lips curling into a grin. "Aye. We sailed together around last Colosso, unless I'm mistaken."

"That's interesting," Garet snapped, flicking his eyes between the other three constantly. "What the hell is going on?"

The bald man laughed. "Fair enough. Kaja, the captain in question," he said nodding his head to both of them. "But let's step outside, we're disturbing the people who just want to drink in peace."

Isaac glanced quickly at Rachel, whose furious expression had vanished once more. She met his eyes momentarily, long enough to make Isaac's throat throb slightly, then spun around and walked for the door. He turned back to Kaja,

finding the man straightening the table, then dropping a few gold pieces on it with an apology.

Following him outside, Isaac quickly scanned the street to find Rachel, not entirely unsure the woman was not simply waiting to ambush him. Once he found her leaning against some storage crates, however, he relaxed and turned to Kaja, finally figuring out why the man simultaneously looked familiar and unfamiliar. "Didn't you used to have a beard?"

"Aye, I did," he said, bringing up a hand to stroke the non-existent facial hair. "I change it up every so often. You'll understand, someday. I expect you'll grow yourself a mighty beard when you're able, for no other reason than you can."

Garet snorted. "Oh man, I would love to see that. But really, while it's neat to see you again, Kaja, what the hell just happened in there?"

Shrugging, Kaja gestured at Garet. "You had the right of it, actually. Of course I wanted to be here. But I've got no use for a first mate who doesn't want to be a captain herself. So I give her some of the stuff I usually do, to see how she fares." He glanced over at Rachel, who had not so much as flicked her eyes in their direction. "...She's got a bit of a temper, as you probably noticed. Good heart, though. You pissed her off something fierce by insulting me."

"I, uh, didn't really mean it," Isaac said, feeling a bit foolish.

Kaja waved his hand. "I know. I saw your goal there. Brave, but not the best idea. Rachel's got Poseidon's wrath in her when she gets mad. You're a fine warrior, but when someone like that gets the drop on you, even if you eventually win, you won't be walking away feeling good."

"So...she didn't know you were there, either?" Garet asked.

"Not at all," the captain said, reaching back to flick at a hood lying against his back. "In a port, especially in a pub, it's a simple matter to stay unnoticed. All about blending. But," he crossed his arms across his chest, his experienced muscles bulging out casually, "none of that's why we're here."

"We're after Deadbeard," Isaac said, then glanced around the street, wondering if announcing that was wise.

"Aye, I know that much," Kaja said. "I'm more interested in the 'why'...and particularly the 'how'."

Isaac looked up and down the street again, then said, "We want to try and deal with him: we'll help him find the lost love he's supposed to be searching for, so he can pass on, and he helps us against the Anemoi."

Kaja watched him for a long moment in silence. The calls of gulls filled it for him, and endless wave of noise that normally just merged into the background ambiance of the Docks. A burst of raucous laughter emerged from the windows of a building across the street. The whistles of the women hanging out the windows had faded with dawn's light, replaced by the calls of various vendors hawking their wares.

Isaac stared at one of them, an old man holding up various pieces of armor to passerby. That strange feeling of some hidden knowledge pressed against his consciousness again, then vanished. Rather than follow it stubbornly this time, Isaac simply continued to stare at the man, trying to trigger the sensation again, but before he could, Kaja spoke, drawing his attention.

"You play a dangerous game," the man said softly.

Garet raised an eyebrow. "To be fair, so do you. I wouldn't call sailing against Deadbeard a nice stroll down the beach."

Kaja grimaced. "I know that well. Not long after Colosso last year, a ship we set sail with met him. He came out of the darkness on her port side, with us on her starboard. We fled. Neither the captain nor I wanted to, but we knew staying would be suicide. We saw him, though," Kaja added, his voice dropping. "Saw them yellow eyes in the gloom, mocking us as we pressed the rowers. No one wanted that hell he offers."

A cold and snide reflection of his own voice whispered to Isaac, *This is the spirit you want to find? You think you can possibly win against him?*

"We never saw the other ship again," Kaja continued. "We waited for days for her to pull in, but she never did, neither here nor at the Kalay Docks. The captain retired that week, and I bought the ship from him. Took a few months before I could work up the nerve to put her back to sea, though."

Insight flashed in Isaac's head. "That's why you took this job," he said. "You want Deadbeard, too."

Kaja looked at him for a moment, then nodded. "Aye, you've got the right of it. That demon has plagued the Karagol for longer than I've been sailing. I've only run across him the once, but that once is enough. I can't stand to spend the rest of my sailing days in fear of being the ship in the middle next time, and I've got no mind to retire just yet. I'll rid myself of that fear, by one means or another."

"Well, you don't need to worry about the 'another'," Garet said, giving the sailor a wide grin. "Worst comes to worst, we can take him. We've got a crazy list of victories between us.

Krakens, dragons, Anemian kings, and spirit legions have all fallen before us."

Isaac's mind twinged strongly, making him feel light-headed momentarily. He let his eyes drift out of focus and said, "Garet, say that again."

"What, that we've killed krakens, dragons, kings, and spirits?"

Not spirits. He had not said that the first time. He had said spirit *legions,* the aggregate collection of spirits inhabiting the Myrtle armor.

The Myrtle armor.

Isaac swore loudly. He saw Rachel start towards them, startled, but forced both her and Kaja out of his mind and turned to Garet. "We have to get back to Tolbi, right now! Now! We have to go!"

Garet reached out and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Hey, calm down and tell me what's going on."

"The armor," Isaac said, trying to organize the thoughts that had all occurred simultaneously with his revelation. "The Myrtle armor, it's still with Sunshine."

"Yeah..." Garet said, nodding.

"Ivan said he dreamed of you fighting Atropos, and you were wearing the armor."

"Yeah."

Isaac swallowed. "When he talked to Atropos, she told him that she had the same dream. She told him it would have

happened if she stayed with Clotho when we fought. She told him it would have already happened! Not that it could, or might, he said she was certain about it. *She lied to him!"*

Garet swore.

A/N: As much as I love her, Rachel is not mine, and is simply cameoing from a great piece of Golden Sun fanfiction by Dracobolt, *Interlude,* who has helped support me during this slog of a chapter. It's currently only hosted at the Temple of Kraden, so check it out if you are interested.

Chapter 19: Queen's Fork

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 19 – Queen's Fork

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The sun set on the far side of Kalay. Ivan watched it drift down through the clouds, burning a deep red, as if angry to be drawn away from Weyard yet again. In the last instants before Sol dipped below the horizon, all manner of colors spanned the sky. It moved from the bright orange surrounding the day's end, almost hitting the entire spectrum of a rainbow as it cycled through to deep purple somewhere behind him.

It skipped green, unfortunately, a color that Ivan held close to his heart.

Even the trees had abandoned the color with the advent of winter so close. Warm colors decorated their branches now, painting the very quintessential image of autumn. He had watched them do the same the year before, from the same chair outside his home. He had watched as the leaves curled and died, their sources going into hibernation before the snows arrived. He had watched as green blossomed everywhere the following spring, the trees giving birth to new life.

He looked down. The young girl on his lap had fallen asleep. He could not be sure as to when, since she often sat in silence while they gazed out over the city. She leaned back against his chest, his arms curled around her waist, and moved little. Sometimes she would ask questions about the

things she saw, while sometimes she would ask questions about whatever happened to cross her mind. Always questions, though, never comments. Ivan made a point to praise her curiosity at every opportunity, making her little face glow.

Several people still moved about the streets. Ivan watched them go, silently greeting the few that passed near enough. Most knew of his nightly habit by this point; they often asked how one so busy managed to spend so much time doing nothing. Always, he told them that he squeezed his schedule tight solely to make that time to sit with his daughter.

The wind drifted by, rustling the few leaves that had fallen. It walked them along the street and around the corner of another house, before dying down and allowing the ambiance of the city to return. Wheels clattered across cobblestones, indistinguishable voices carried across the air, and down by the docks, a bell rang across the bay several times.

He would not wake her, he decided. The mild weather would serve as their blanket during the night, if it came to that. Instead, he leaned his head down and planted a soft kiss atop the girl's head, whispering his love for her to the coming night.

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"I want to talk to her."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

Mia pinched at the bridge of her nose. She and Alex had returned less than ten minutes ago, yet already she could feel an argument brewing between him and Ivan. They

might have reached some kind of peace lately, but it would take more than a truce to reconcile their radically different ways of thinking.

Alex wore the Mercurian sword at his hip, though Mia had noticed Ivan no longer carried Dullahan's blade. Had Garet taken it to the Docks with him? She did not mind; though she would never say it to him, the sword looked terribly out of place on the boy's back.

"Where is Kraden?" she asked, not opening her eyes. She *really* did not want to mediate between them again.

"In town," Ivan said. "He went to talk with people about some reconstruction that hadn't started yet."

Mia sighed. "Alright. If Atropos is telling the truth, then nothing bad will come of speaking with her, agreed?" The two nodded. "If she's lying, then she's biding her time for something, presumably Sheba, and could very well be attempting to fish for information. However, as annoying as he gets with it, Alex *is* quite skilled with his wordplay, similarly skilled in hiding his thoughts, and spectacularly skilled in deceit."

Alex frowned, but said nothing.

Ivan frowned as well. "I suppose you're right. I'd like to be there still, though."

"Of course," Alex said, bowing his head. "I am not trying to suggest an incompetency on your part, or subterfuge on mine, merely that we are different people, who think in different ways and notice different things."

"All three of us will go," Mia said firmly, then paused, glancing to the side. "Aisa, you don't mind waiting here?"

"Hmm?" The young woman turned away from the great map of Weyard that acted as a window. "Oh, no. So long as you aren't planning on hurting her, at least."

Alex shook his head. "I am not eager to pick a fight with another Anemian King."

Ivan led them from the study and down the hall, pausing outside of a closed door as the two guards stepped aside. "Are you sure?" When Alex nodded, Ivan pulled the door open and stood back, letting him pass through.

She followed Alex into the room without a word, Ivan close behind her. A blond woman lay in the room's sole bed, her head propped up by a pair of pillows. She held a book in her lap, and Mia felt the tension in her melting away. With the bandages that covered half her visible body, Mia would never have guessed her to be an Anemian King if she had not seen her in Anemos already.

Atropos glanced up at them as they entered, closing the book on her thumb. "The Mercurian. I have not yet had the chance to congratulate you on your victory over Clotho. An impressive feat, to be sure."

"I keep impressive company," Alex said, bowing slightly. "Clotho kept none."

"I admit, I have found your friends more capable than I first believed," the woman said, then shook her head. "It seems I've grown a bit too arrogant, as well. But, to imagine those who grew without Alchemy's light overcoming one such as him..."

"That is, of course, the ultimate end of all such tyrants," Alex said. "Clotho merely had the misfortune of encountering the rebels who would overthrow him rather early."

Atropos shifted in her bed, pushing herself to more of a sitting position, but stopped with a hiss of pain, her hand clutching at her side.

Alex stepped forward, gently pushing her arm aside. "Please, allow me to ex-"

The king's hand snapped up and, too late to respond, Mia noticed the pulse of Psynergy. Yellow light flashed across the short distance between her palm and Alex's body, but the man did not flinch away. He did not move at all. *He's can't move!* Mia realized.

Whether Ivan had reached the same conclusion or not, she could not say, but both of them moved towards the king together. She could see the fury in the boy's expression as his hand moved to his side, grasping the hilt of his sword.

Before he could draw it, however, Atropos' hand flicked out again. Wind picked Mia up with ease, hurling her into the corner of the room against the bookshelf. She smashed into the shelves, cracks snapping out only from the wood, fortunately, then collapsed down to the floor. A jug of something that smelled strongly of tea shattered against the floor alongside Ivan, knocked from the desk across the room as he landed in a similar fashion to her. Mia pushed herself to her feet, wincing at the twinge of pain in her back, keeping her eyes on Atropos.

The Anemian had risen from the bed and placed her other hand against Alex's forehead, brimming with Jupiter Psynergy once more. It did not flash and vanish as the previous spells had, but held together, a sign of a focused and concentrated effort.

"She's draining him!" Ivan shouted, pushing himself to his feet as well and charging at the king again. Her casual burst

of wind met Ivan's arm, held out as if holding a shield, and though the gust stopped his forward motion, it did not lift him from the ground this time.

Atropos' gaze never left Alex, though a small noise of annoyance escaped her mouth. She kept one hand on Alex, the other pointed at Ivan. Wind howled through the small room, whipping at all the fabric inside it, but the main force was directed at Ivan, preventing him from advancing.

So Mia went instead.

She could not pull enough water from the air effectively; the amount she could draw would take precious time to freeze after condensing, time she did not have. Instead, she reached her mind to the spilled tea, pulling the water out so thoroughly that it left dried and withered herbs on the floor. It wound through the air like a streamer, circling behind Alex to strike at Atropos from Mia's own side. It solidified into a crystal stinger as it flew, lashed out as if from a manticore's tail.

Atropos flicked her gaze at the ice.

It melted instantly, falling to the ground as Mia felt her control over it shatter, vanishing as if she had dispelled it herself. She stared at the Anemian in confusion for a moment. The only means of doing that was to seal an Adept's Psynergy, which Mia had not felt, or to wrench control of the Psynergy with force. But Atropos had no sway over Mercury, so that could not-

Mia gasped.

Atropos smiled.

With a flick of the king's wrist, Alex launched into Mia, shoving her backwards into the wall. They missed the bookcase this time, to Mia's relief, though her head slammed against the wooden wall regardless, sending bright lights flashing across her vision. She slumped down once more, reflexively holding Alex to her body. She heard another loud thump from the other side of the room, followed by the woman's fading laughter, a high and tinkling sound that reminded Mia of holiday merriment.

She had no time to sit here like this, stunned. Mia closed her eyes, bringing Psynergy forth to try and calm the waves in her head. While she worked, she heard the call of a pair of guards from the hallway. The snap of lightning rang through the building, followed by two dull thuds, and then the front door opened and closed, leaving the palace in silence.

A silent fury rose inside Mia, clawing its way forward. This woman had been a guest, a *patient* here. Had this been her plan all along? She suspected so. She had deceived them all, taking advantage of their goodwill and decency as human beings to tear them apart. The anger ate away at the calm presence filling her mind, tearing away her concentration. *Good enough.* Mia opened her eyes and glanced around the room. Ivan sat against the side wall in a similar manner to her, his eyes unfocused from the hard impact as he tried to stand up again. Alex lay in her lap, limp and staring at nothing. "Alex!" He did not respond, so she slapped him once. "Alex!"

The man blinked and turned towards Mia. "It's gone. It's gone."

"I know," Mia said, then shifted him to her shoulder and pushed both of them to their feet. "Can you stand?" She let him go, not bothering to wait for an answer. He held himself

up, so Mia crossed the room and pulled Ivan up. She pushed him flat against the wall, making him stand straight, then locked her eyes with his. She placed both hands on either side of his head, focusing her Psynergy. Ivan seemed to understand her intent and maintained the eye contact.

After a few seconds she stepped back and glanced at Alex. He still seemed slightly disoriented, but Mia had no knowledge of what kind of secondary effects such a drain might leave him with. Instead, she said firmly, "Follow me," and he obeyed.

She stepped into the hall, moving towards the front doors. The smell of burnt hair and roasted flesh filled the hallway, and a single glance told her checking the guards that had been thrown into the entrance hall would be a futile effort. Hurried footsteps echoed down the opposite hallway as Mia reached for the door, and she glanced over her shoulder as Aisa slid to a stop, looking at the dead guards in horror.

"What..." she started, trailing off.

"She wasn't waiting for Sheba, Aisa. She was waiting for Alex," Mia said. "Don't follow us."

Aisa glanced again at the guards, her face losing another shade of color. "I... Why?"

"Because we're going to kill your mother," Mia said as she pulled the door open, stepping through it.

Harsh sunlight, unhindered by clouds, blinded her for a few seconds. She raised a hand to shield her eyes from it, scanning the gardens out front for the Anemian. After a quick glance to her sides, as well as up, she moved towards the road at a jog. As she reached the crest of the hill, she could see Atropos' form a short distance down the road,

walking at a leisurely pace. As soon as Mia spotted the woman, though, she stopped, turned around, and placed her hands on her hips, staring up the hill.

The calm arrogance unnerved Mia, forcing her to suppress a shiver. The cool, sure confidence she felt while speaking to Aisa vanished, replaced by doubt. There were three of them. How were they going to overcome someone who now had nigh-unlimited control over three of the four elements?

She pushed the uncertainty aside as she started down the hill, Alex and Ivan following behind her. As she approached the Anemian, she could see a small smile on her face, one that only served to reignite her fury.

"I was hoping you would follow," Atropos said, her smile growing. "You are quite a tenacious bunch. I find your determination fascinating."

"What do you plan on doing with it?" Mia asked, mostly to give herself time to settle her anger again.

"The Golden Sun? Whatever I please, of course. I'll have no need to bow to my dear king anymore. Anemos will be mine, and Weyard along with it." The woman glanced out over the town. "But first, I'd like to find this missing piece."

Of course. Just as Alex had done, Atropos would be after Isaac. In its fragmented form, the power she held only provided incredible levels of Psynergy, not the reality-changing abilities the Sun was rumored to possess. Would she be as gentle to Isaac as Alex had planned?

To Mia's horror, the Anemian turned back to her. "Isaac? That's the one who fought Clotho, is he not? Aha! I wondered why he had remained. I assumed him to be nothing more than a regular Venusian."

"That's impossible," Mia breathed. "I didn't feel a thing."

Atropos frowned. "Really, child, did you honestly expect to? The mind is my domain, my specialty...though I hardly need such expertise against you mortals."

"Then... Then everything you said was a lie?" Ivan said, stepping up beside Mia. "Everything you told me?"

"No, not at all. I spoke only the truth." The king tapped her chin for a moment. "Or rather, I spoke the truth until you mentioned your dream. A lie there was the only means of getting you to set aside that facet of distrust."

Ivan shook his head. "What do you mean, you never lied? You never mentioned anything about Alex! You said you wanted help stopping Lachesis."

Atropos nodded. "And that I did...but not from you. I wanted his daughter as leverage to depose him and take his place, initially, but the allure of Alchemy itself is far more attracting." She turned around and began walking down the hill once more.

"Where are you going?" Mia called.

"To the Karagol. That is where your friend went, did he not?"

The world twisted and bent around Mia. Everything resettled as she turned to face Atropos straight on, standing between her and the city. Water began to condense in the air around her. "You're not going near Isaac."

Atropos laughed again, a rich and full sound that Mia could not believe belonged to such a woman. "Your nobility breaks my heart, Imilian. I would like to destroy you, but I think I

have more appropriate actions. Where are your allies in this defense, I wonder?"

"Behind you," Ivan called out, though he stopped a short distance away from Atropos, as had Alex. "We stand with Mia."

"Oh?" The Anemian did not turn to look at them, but narrowed her eyes at Mia, instead. "Are you sure about that?"

The silence that preceded Alex stepping forward was the loudest she had ever heard.

The man stopped behind Atropos, then dropped to one knee. "In exchange for a single request once you have obtained it...I will aid you in your desire for the Golden Sun, Your Highness."

"Alex!" Mia gasped. Surely he wouldn't? Surely he was just getting close, getting in range for a surprise attack? Surely this was a deception of some kind? Surely... Surely...

"She stands in our way," Atropos said. "If you would aid me, then move her."

He wouldn't. Mia knew Alex would never harm her. But as he stepped past the king, pulling that black book from its satchel, doubt blossomed in her mind. She knew how much Marie meant to him, and how much *she* meant to him, but...she had never seen those two compared. Alex had never needed to choose between Marie and Mia.

She felt cold, despite the warmth of Tolbi's winter.

Alex paused as he opened the book. "Mia... I know asking you to understand is pointless, so instead-"

"I will not move," she said, her voice cracking slightly. She took a deep breath to stabilize herself again.

He frowned, then glanced over his shoulder at Atropos for a moment. "Please, Mia. I don't want to-"

"Make your choice, Alex," she said quietly. "Me, or Marie. *Weyard* or Marie."

Atropos no longer existed. Ivan no longer existed. Tolbi no longer existed. Only she and Alex remained, alone on this road, facing two different directions. She hoped against hope that she held wrong information again, that his betrayal was merely her misunderstanding, but the hope flickered and died as Alex answered her question.

"That's too bad." Mia raised her hand, pointing the palm at Alex. Everything had gone cold now. "We already know what I choose between you and Weyard."

The water drifting around her froze as it launched forward.

She knew it would not reach him. One of his hands dropped to the pommel of the sword at his waist as the ice approaching him returned to water, splattering the ground at his feet. Mia doubted he even needed the sword's power; they had gone through similar trials, and held approximately the same power in Psynergy. At that distance, keeping control of it herself would be difficult, even without his opposition.

Alex held the black book up, reminding Mia of a preacher starting a sermon. Rather than throw words at her, however, she felt the pulse of Psynergy. An unsettling feeling accompanied it.

It's a tool, she remembered, *one capable of any number of skills. He doesn't even need to use Mercury Psynergy.*

Flames washed out from Alex, moving in a manner Mia had never seen. They rolled forward like a wave, bouncing from the ground and splashing forwards, then continuing towards her. She had seen molten rock do such things, as well as water, but not fire. It seemed impossible for it to act as water.

That impossibility did not keep her from trusting her eyes, however. She could not pull as much water from the air as she liked, but she slammed it into the incoming fire regardless. The two met in a clash of steam that Mia seized control of, spreading it out as she moved off the road, hoping to let the strange river of fire move past her.

As she retreated behind the white cover, she stopped using Psynergy to hide herself, while straining to sense anyone else's. Alex's Psynergy...something seemed strange about it. Despite generating fire, which gave off a blatant Mars aura to her senses, the casting itself had done no such thing. She merely felt the presence of Psynergy, yet found herself unable to determine the element. Could the book mask such a thing? Or did it transcend the elements?

Movement.

The fire punched through the steam, rolling over the grass with a bottomless hunger. She could feel the fires spreading more readily, now that it traveled over a flammable material, instead of the stone road. It switched directions, leaving the ground ablaze where it had washed over.

Alex was not bothering to find her, she realized. Why would he? He could simply set the entire field on fire and force her to reveal herself. Her rapidly thinning steam would leave her

visible before long, but to create more, she would have to use Psynergy and give away her presence. The flaming river wound throughout the grass blindly still, but given long enough, it would find her. She could do nothing against Atropos with Alex after her.

Ivan, she thought. *Don't die.*

Turning as the sun's rays pierced through the dissipating steam, she dashed for the tree line behind her.

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Atropos turned her eyes upon him.

Ivan could not move. He recognized that gaze, those vicious eyes that laughed at him. They sized him up in an instant, finding him nothing more than a child, a distraction fit only to toy with. Victory was not a question for those eyes, but a way of life.

These eyes did not hold flames in them, however. No, they held storms, and quakes, and blizzards. They held the power of the gods, and yet for all that power, they lacked that which he had failed against before.

It was as close to a sign as he could hope to get.

He drew his sword.

Atropos' smile stretched across her face. "Our little Jovian fancies himself a hero, does he? To be the one who single-handedly defeats a King of Anemos? Childish delusions are always so adorable."

"I am not a child," he said, though the knot in his stomach disagreed.

"You're all children to me," Atropos said, waving her hand. "Some people have reservations about killing children. I don't. Does that scare you? Does it make you want to run and hide under your bed?"

"Of course I want to," he said, wondering whether he would regret not carrying Dullahan's sword. "I'd be a fool not to be afraid right..." He trailed off, noticing Atropos frown as her eyes drifted past him. For a moment, he refused to follow her gaze, suspecting a trap, but his mind pointed out that whether or not his back was turned seemed irrelevant.

He found Aisa moving down the hill, halfway between jogging and walking. She had picked up a guard's sword and Ivan could see she had at least some training with the weapon.

Ivan moved to one side of the road as Aisa moved to the other, forming a triangle between the three. Her eyes flickered back and forth between Ivan and Atropos. "Mother... What's going on? You told me you were hiding from King Lachesis."

Atropos snorted. "Hiding from him? I would never bother with something so pointless. He might not have visions as frequently as I do, but they still happen. If I was not capable of standing against him directly, how could I call myself King? I expected these fools to believe such a tale, but not you, Aisa. How disappointing."

"Then... Then he never attacked you?" Aisa asked.

"Of course not," her mother said. "What would he have to gain from attacking me? He was certainly furious that I did not aid Clotho, but enough to attempt to kill the other living King? I thought I raised you to be more clever than this. Did

you think I would not lie to you simply because I gave birth to you?"

Aisa lowered the sword, her empty hand balling into a fist. "You're my mother! You're not supposed to lie to me, to manipulate me! I trusted you! I came here out of concern for you!"

"How terrible it must be, little prince, realizing you are not the center of the universe," Atropos said, sighing through her nose. "Do you know how many daughters and sons I have raised? You knew yourself not to be my firstborn. He betrayed me long ago, as you seem intent on doing now."

"I'm not trying to betray you!" Aisa shouted. "This war is not necessary! Please, mother, stop this! We can help them, we can stop King Lachesis! Please, I beg you!"

Atropos casual smirk vanished, replaced by a sharp frown. "Beg? *Beg?* No one of such noble birth should be *begging,* like a common street urchin. Nor should one of such birth show such weak tender-heartedness. You are not fit to be a king, Aisa."

Aisa stared at the woman for a moment. "Then... Then I cast aside my noble birth, like Sheba has. If I must fight you to stop this, then I will fight. I will fight for Anemos and the future it deserves!"

A surge of Psynergy rolled outward from the younger woman, an unfocused wave that caught Ivan by surprise. He noticed no attack on Atropos; rather, he saw Jupiter's aura wreathed around Aisa, burning bright white along her skin. Surprise replaced the clear resolution that had covered the rest of her face, the woman evidently as confused as Ivan.

The halo of Jupiter energy flashed once, then pooled around her back. Two great, white wings unfolded from her body, spreading outward and flicking off the trace amounts of concentrated Psynergy that had formed them. The feathers shone in the morning sun, whiter than untouched snow.

The Wings of Anemos... Ivan thought to himself. He had caught a glimpse of them when they first met Clotho, but they had vanished only seconds later. They looked nothing like the Wings that had been affixed to the *Kailani,* of course, but he supposed such a difference was self-explanatory. This was the natural talent of the Anemoi, as organic to them as the draconian blood of the Proxians.

For her part, Aisa seemed to have understood what happened. Amazement replaced confusion as she glanced over her shoulder at the great wing. She reached back to touch it, ignoring the odd angle required as she stretched her arm.

"No, I don't believe I can allow this."

At the sound of her mother's voice, Aisa arched her back and fell to her hands and knees, sword clattering to the ground beside her. The lingering remnants of Jupiter energy flowed away from her through the air, moving towards Atropos' outstretched hand.

Ivan recognized the same draining technique she had performed on Alex. Lightning snapped along his blade as he lashed it out at the king, arcing it through the air, but a flick of her spare hand caused the bolt to rebound from an invisible barrier, the same kind Alex often used.

He did not understand; Aisa had no special powers for Atropos to steal. She had wings of her own. His mind felt numb as he watched the young woman gasp on the ground,

a second bolt of lightning meeting the same fate as the first. Why was she doing this? Aisa's wings vanished, breaking into Psynergetic particles as they joined the river of power, flowing into the vast sea Atropos already occupied. Her aura vanished next.

Her color began to follow.

Her golden hair dimmed, as if clouds obscured the sun, but the sky remained clear. The healthy pale of her skin faded to a sickly gray, and though Ivan could not see her eyes, he suspected they had done the same.

Atropos was not stealing her power.

Atropos was stealing her *life.*

"Stop it!" he shouted, throwing more lightning at the Anemian, to no effect. "Stop it!" Ignored by the woman, he dashed towards her instead, moving his sword to the side to strike.

The king swung her other arm around, cloaking it in wind as she parried the blade aside. The force of the wind ripped it from Ivan's grip, hurling it to the side of the road. Before he could follow it, her hand snapped up and clamped down around his throat.

He felt the draining flow stop as she focused on him. *Run*, he thought at Aisa, the edges of his vision flashing white. *Get away.*

Before he fell into unconsciousness, Atropos' hand loosened and her face came into focus, looking at him. The blood rushed back into his head and made the world spin for a moment before stabilizing. He found her smiling.

"You're going to watch, serpent-spawn," she said. The cobblestones of the road parted as the earth beneath rose up, gripping Ivan a bit more loosely than Atropos had gripped his neck. Her fingers pushed on his cheek, pointing his face towards Aisa, who had not risen. "You're going to watch what happens to traitors."

"No," he muttered, his voice cracking. He tried to call his Psynergy, to use it to break free, but his head was still dizzy from the sudden changes in blood flow. He could not concentrate enough.

Atropos turned back to Aisa, raising her hand. The draining resumed, starting with the breath Aisa had recovered in the brief pause.

Ivan heard it leave her in a choking gasp, her body nearly collapsing to the ground again. Her arms shook with the effort of holding her herself up. Silver overtook her hair, in the same way most of the world lost its color when viewed through Jupiter's eye. Her skin cracked like the hard clay of a desert, gone too long without moisture.

Aisa raised her head slowly, mouthed the word 'mother', and crumbled into dust.

Ivan could not look away. He watched her clothes collapse onto the gray outline on the ground, its edges distorting in a gentle breeze that moved across the road. His mouth felt dry. He wanted to swallow, but could not. He wanted to scream, but could not. The only thing he could do was turn his head to Atropos.

The stone around him withdrew to the ground, letting the boy slump to his knees as he looked up at the king. A non-distracted part of him pointed out the pain of dropping to the cobblestones, but most of him failed to notice.

Atropos placed her hands on his cheeks, cradling them in her palms. "Such is the fate of traitors, child. Turn aside. Cast aside that traitorous blood and I will let you live. I will not kill your friend, either, not unless he seeks death by opposing me. Walk back up the road."

He did not answer at first, but turned his head to the side, looking towards the trees. The trees Mia and Alex had vanished into. The flames had begun to die on the grass, leaving great, black patches. He felt a faint pulse of Jupiter Psynergy, only noticeable because of the near silence in his mind.

"Ah... You're concerned about the girl." Atropos shook her head. "Your concern is well placed. I cannot risk the loss of such a useful ally. I will need to dispose of her." The corners of her mouth twitched up. "Would you go to her side? Would you rescue her? Of course, if you attack the man, you'll be opposing me, which you know the penalty for."

His mind had still not resumed normal operations. He tried to focus on Atropos, on his anger, on his fear, but felt his focus slip away each time. When he thought of Mia, killed by Alex, however, his mind held. "Will... Would you spare her, then?"

Atropos' smile widened. "If you go to her aid? She will get the same mercy Isaac will: if she leaves, and she shall live."

Ivan began to laugh.

A frown crossed the Anemian's face and she stepped back. "Do you find my offer amusing? I could simply kill you all, if you prefer."

"I dreamed of this," Ivan muttered, torn between bursting into laughter and tears. "That I would choose between

myself and Mia."

But it was more than a choice between himself and Mia, wasn't it? Alex could kill Mia...and he would not stop there. Isaac and Piers would follow, and eventually, Lachesis as well. If he walked away, he knew they would win, in the end. He could save the world.

He just had to let Mia die.

Or he could convince her to leave. He could tell her that he would stop Alex, and that she needed to find the others, to let them know what happened. He could take her place. He could give his life for her.

He realized that he wanted to. For most of his life, he had questioned the concept of giving his life to protect someone, never sure he would ever be able to. Not until he had met his friends and grown to love them all had he realized, yes, he was not only capable of doing it, but willing. He would die for her, and in doing so, he would risk the world.

Countless lives weighed against one. The philosophical debate of the ages, reason versus emotion. Were the one not Mia, Ivan knew that he would side with the numbers. Were he not the required sacrifice otherwise, he knew that he would not have the question of his cowardice, either.

Mia discarded that reasoning, though. Had she not said that all those lives were each one? That when the question was not a straight trade, but only a possibility, every attempt should be made to save all?

Ivan closed his eyes. Why was he even thinking about it? He could never betray Mia like that, even with the world at stake. His choice was nothing but an illusion. Despite his

dreams showing him two possible futures, only one could actually happen.

A vision does not dictate the necessary future, only a possible one.

Atropos' words rang through his head, ones that echoed Hama's own thoughts on dreams, but he saw no use in them. The dream had presented two possible outcomes; even if he could never bring himself to choose one of them, he could not deny its existence.

Although...most dreams did not show a choice. They showed him a situation, and the choice came about when he strove to avoid that situation, therefore invalidating the dream. Could he not do the same now? The dream showed him choosing his own life, by walking away, or choosing Mia's life, by going to her. Where could another choice even take place? If he did not go to Mia, Atropos would see her dead.

Unless Atropos never reached Mia. Ivan opened his eyes and frowned. Could Mia defeat Alex on her own? Ivan had no idea, but he found it far more plausible than the woman defeating both her former clansman and the Anemian King. How could he stop Atropos from attacking Mia, though? Short of killing her himself, he could...

Ivan hesitated. Numbers did not exist to measure such small chances. Not only did the woman hold centuries of experience in Jupiter Psynergy over him, she now held an equal power in Mercury and Venus. She outclassed him in every possible way. Attempting it was all but suicide.

Only a coward shies away for fear of failure, Mia whispered to him.

Ivan swallowed and mentally pulled his sword to his hand.

Atropos' eyebrows rose. "I'm not sure I understand your choice here, child."

"My name is *Ivan,"* he said, returning to his feet. He hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. "I will not run, nor will I allow you to harm Mia. I will fight you, Your Highness, and with the help of the gods, I will defeat you."

The woman stared at him incredulously for a long moment, then clapped her hands together as laughter filled the silence between them. "Well, this is quite a surprise. A bit overly dramatic, but I suppose that's unavoidable. I was expecting you to run to her side, to plead with her to save herself, that you would die in her place. I'd hoped you had enough courage in you to not simply flee, but this! You have exceeded my expectations. Well done!"

Ivan opened his mouth to retort, to tell her that he did not care, but he realized how foolish it would be. He would be wasting time by discussing anything further. Instead, he reached above Atropos with his mind, tearing a rift in the latent Jupiter energy there. It responded instantly to repair itself, snapping down at the woman in the form of lightning.

She raised a hand, channeling it through her own body into the ground without so much as a glance upward. The drawback of natural lightning, Ivan remembered; it struck with more power, but could be diverted more easily. Sheba had made use of that to save people when the Anemoi struck Venus Lighthouse, hadn't she?

"I hope you intend on bringing more to this fight than that, Ivan," Atropos said. She spread her arms to the side and her own wings unfolded from her back before snapping to full extension. They flapped twice, pushing her into the air, then spread wide and held her aloft, though Ivan did not see how.

Was it an extension of the ability to hover? "But...this will be a bit boring, really. I'll kill you far too easily. Let's make things more interesting. Give chase, Ivan. Show me your courage!"

Ivan watched her turn in the air and soar off down the road, looking no different from a large bird after a few seconds. He sheathed his blade, then started down after her towards Tolbi.

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Mia did not move.

Alex was close. She could hear the crunch of dead leaves beneath his boots, slow and methodical. She could not see him, but her mind provided an image of his eyes darting back and forth, scanning the woods for any disturbance, any abnormality. A quick, silent prayer went up to Coatlicue in thanks for never allowing him to learn much hunting and tracking.

She crouched behind a tree, Mercury wrapped around her to shroud her presence. The thick canopy gave her plenty of cover to hide in, despite the bright morning sun. Could that book enable him to find her, regardless? Mia doubted it. Certainly, allowing that river of fire to flow freely would dispel the shadows hiding her, but Alex seemed unwilling to set the entire forest ablaze to find her.

Was he... Was he not trying? Had he chased her away from Atropos, intending to let her escape?

No. She knew Alex to be a skilled actor, but she could see through his masks. She had seen the pain in his eyes, hidden behind the mask of calm determination - a mask

tempered with truth. She grit her teeth together, forcing the thought from her head. He had made his choice.

What *was* he doing, then? She doubted he could find her through traditional means; he needed to force her from hiding. What else could that book do?

The leaves of the trees rustled alongside those that had abandoned their homes. When it paused, she realized that Alex no longer moved, though she knew he had not reached her location yet. She clenched her hands as she held her breath, trying to listen for any further movement from the man.

The breeze seemed determined to thwart her, however. It returned, whispering amongst the trees. It curled around her crouched form, sending the dead leaves scattering across the forest floor. One accustomed to sneaking would certainly use such an audible distraction to cover his movements.

Mia released the breath she had been holding slowly and silently. Audibly tracking him was no longer an option. Using the wind's noise as well, she inched forward, ensuring she stayed within the tree's shadow, and peered around the trunk.

Alex stood a short distance away, exactly where she had last heard him move. His eyes scanned the woods, though he made no motion in any direction. Was he simply watching for her, hoping to get lucky? No. Not Alex. Alex did not rely on luck. He would-

She gagged as she began her slow inhale, feeling her throat burn. Unable to refuse to breathe, however, she choked down a lungful of air as the fire spread into her chest, pain blossoming across it. She fell to her knees and one hand, the other clutching at her chest as her Psynergy dispelled.

Something... Something toxic had invaded her. She shivered once, recognizing it and her growing headache as symptoms of a fever. What could possibly move so fast, however?

The wind rustled the leaves near her again.

Clever, she thought. *He spread it on the wind.* Her cloak of shadows, while up, maintained its own Psynergy signature invisible to other Adepts, but use of anything else would shatter the spell. It worked both ways; while hidden, she could not sense any Psynergy, either. He must have used something, knowing the toxins he released would force her to reveal herself, while the wind could not fail to reach her with it.

The crunch of leaves made her head turn, finding Alex approaching. His face still held the same pained, but determined, expression. He had not drawn the blade at his hip; he had no need. Mia knew as well as he how poor his sword skills were, and the blade did not need to be drawn to access its latent power.

She forced herself to stand, despite the tendrils of pain crawling into her legs and arms. Breaths came with difficulty, each one a ragged wheeze that sounded more appropriate on an old man. The pressure building behind her eyes would soon become unbearable. She could taste the toxic air still drifting, though Alex seemed unaffected by it. Why wouldn't he be?

There had to be a way out. Somewhere. She pulled her Psynergy into herself, holding the poisonous substance at bay for a moment, stalling the expansion of the pain to think. While Alex held that book, she could not match him in Psynergy; he could counter everything she could do, though she could not say the same for herself. Even without the

book, the sword gave him a strong advantage. She could not hide, not without subjecting herself to more of this foul air. She could not even win in a purely physical struggle.

She chose the only course left to her. She ran.

Expelling her Psynergy outward, Mia spun in place as the world did the same. The spike in her head added a few more moments of dizziness to the trip, but even once her vision settled, she still saw only trees. Another flash of pain across her chest threatened to return the woman to her knees, but she locked them, forcing herself to stay up. The air here tasted clean, at least. She reached inside herself once more, this time focusing her Psynergy on expelling the toxins.

She bent at the waist as her body attempted to aid her in the simplest fashion, the contents of her stomach splattering to the forest floor. *That would be useful if it was in my stomach,* she thought bitterly, but used the post-vomit calm to push her purge further. She started to cough and wheeze again as the pain receded, retreating into the center of her chest and breaking the fever. Warmth returned to her senses as she pushed the infection out on her breath.

Alex appeared between a pair of trees.

Mia abandoned her self-purification as the world spun once more, resettling deeper in the forest. She teetered for a second before finding her balance again. Pain tapped at her head, the lingering remnants of the toxin continuing to assault whatever faculties they could reach.

Before she could resume her efforts to rid herself of it, however, Alex warped into view once more. Mia responded in kind, but instead of continuing further into the forest, she moved north, up the hill. After only a few seconds, Alex followed. *Of course,* she realized. *The range isn't far enough*

to get out of sight. He just has to stay alert, and he can find me before I warp again. Nevertheless, she continued to jump through the woods, hoping to lose him. While warping lacked the long-lasting, if weak, scrambling of concentration that accompanied teleportation, it carried its own, immediate version, one much more potent. Each jump cost Mia a second in settling her mind to allow another jump, preventing any immediate Psynergy use.

When she landed in a flat, open area, she recognized that running was as useless as her other, discarded strategies. She glanced around, noting nothing of use in the field; it only held a number of lumpy rocks that rose to her ankles. What, then? What could she do? How did she fight someone so much stronger?

There will always be people stronger than you, Mia, but if you pay attention, you can always find ways to put yourself at an advantage.

Her father's words echoed in her head as clearly as if he had just whispered them in her ear. That was it. Alex's position of power came not from an inherent advantage, but from his tools. If she could remove those tools...

Alex arrived before Mia had time to prepare, but she already knew acting immediately was vital. She drew water from the air and froze it as it formed, launching a few pieces of ice at the book that Alex held. The man sensed the attack and raised his hand, but as Mia expected, nothing happened; he needed another second to recover from the warp. Ice left her control and impaled the book, sending a surge of elation through Mia. The feeling quickly faded. The ice had merely stuck into the book's thick cover.

A gloved hand brushed the chunks out of the leather, fury erupting on Alex's face, something Mia had never seen there before. "So, you're not even satisfied with resisting. Do you hate Marie so much that you must attempt to obliterate every potential means I have to bring her back? Will you not rest until I join her in the grave?"

Mia felt the earth tremble beneath her feet as the wind, natural this time, rustled the surrounding trees. "That's not what-"

"Shut up!" Alex shouted.

She stepped back. What was wrong with him? Even when discussing Marie, he never grew so emotional, never let himself lose control like that. Even if he had decided that Mia's life was worth trading for his sister's, even if it hurt him more than anything to make that choice, he would have maintained his composure. That was what Alex did.

The ground trembled once more, earth rippling as if something burrowed through it. Mia hopped to the side, but the churning soil turned aside before it would have reached her, snaking throughout the field. She watched it turn abruptly several times, following a path invisible to her own eyes, but leaving one similar to plowed earth in its wake. Several of the stones she saw before shifted and tumbled from their places. Mia's eyes settled on one close to her.

They were not just stones.

They were *gravestones.*

Mia's head snapped to Alex. "No! You can't!"

"I can," Alex said. "That's the idea."

Something grabbed Mia's boot. She kicked her foot out and stumbled backwards, drawing water from the air on reflex. The loosened soil made for poor footing, reminding her of the great sand dunes of Suhalla. The churning soil did not seem aimed at slowing her, however, but at hastening the true effect of Alex's spell.

A filthy hand, protruding up from the dirt, clawed about blindly, searching for purchase. It found some after a few seconds, and the pile shifted to reveal a similarly filthy skull. Flesh clung in pieces to the white bone beneath, maggots clinging to it in turn. The overwhelming odor of rotting flesh filled Mia's nostrils, nearly making her vomit all over again; only her familiarity with the stench maintained her composure.

As she backed away, she saw other corpses freeing themselves from their earthen prisons, always where Alex's spell had turned the soil. Had it simply loosened the ground, allowing them to pull themselves free, or had it been the cause of this sacrilege? Mia had no idea. It did not matter.

She pointed at the closest of the dead, the water around her combining into a single pool, then freezing as she moved it forward. Had she done the same initially, then perhaps that profane book would already be destroyed. Before the great spear of ice could touch the corpse, however, it simply melted, splashing it with water. Mia turned to Alex in frustration, finding him watching her from behind the walking dead. Why would he join the fight directly, after all? He never worked like that, if he could help it.

With that sword, however, he could remelt any ice she formed, so long as he remained close. The nearest corpse looked about aimlessly for a moment, but once its eyes settled on Mia, it lurched towards her. Much as she wanted

to simply warp away, leaving them behind, she had no means of knowing if they would return to regular corpses. She had encountered such vagrant dead in her travels before and always found such abominations the most offensive. She could not leave them.

However, so long as she stood in this graveyard, Alex could simply call more to replace any that might fall. She swung her hand forward, drawing and launching a fresh batch of water, though she made no attempt to freeze it. Instead, she splashed it to the ground, turning the loose soil at the corpses' feet to a thick mud. Feet sank into the sludge like water, though removal proved far more difficult.

Mia turned and ran. Alex would draw the water out from the soil, but separating it would take precious seconds, time in which she could put distance between them. How could she destroy those things without Mercury? For Isaac, or Garet, or even Ivan, such a task would be simple, but Mia carried only a dagger, a weapon that she did not trust to be capable of felling the monsters. She glanced about as she ran, hoping to find a fallen branch, something she might use to simply bludgeon them, but the graveyard looked to be maintained well.

To the woods, then. She glanced over her shoulder and found the corpses in pursuit once more, Alex following close behind them. The monstrosities did not run, though they shambled at a speed consistent with a fast walk.

She reached the shadow of the trees once more, but even here, someone had cleared away any fallen branches. Would she have to move further into the forest again?

The rustling reached her ears again, eerily constant. Mia glanced up, but found the thick canopy above unmoving.

What? Before she could pursue the line of thought any further, however, a new one appeared. She turned back, gauging the distance between herself and her attackers. Pausing for a moment to time it properly, she spun and slapped her hands against the trunk of the tree.

Mercury Psynergy poured from her hands without the common delays associated with condensing water from air. White stretched from Mia's hand as the energy coursed into the tree, freezing everything it touched. *Faster,* she thought, pushing aside her headache and focusing. The wave of white continued on, stretching not only around the wood, but through it.

At the first, echoing crack, she pulled away and sidestepped around the trunk. Alex heard it as well, halting while his corpses continued their mindless advance. Mia met his eyes as she reached up with her mind, nudging the trunk higher up.

The frozen segment exploded outward under the weight of the otherwise healthy tree, icy splinters pelting Mia and forcing her to shield her eyes. Her telekinetic push precluded the ponderous balancing act the tree would have otherwise undergone, choosing its direction for it. Alex vanished from sight, warping to safety as Mia expected he would, but his dead servants had no such sense of self-preservation. The upper half of the tree, thick branches stretching out wide, smashed down and buried all of them in a single, deafening crash.

I guess that still counts as a bludgeon, she thought. Even Alex's reappearance could not dampen the thrill of victory. The unmoving trees whispered as she stared at her former clansman. Despite her mind protesting, her heart refused to stay silent. "I defended you, Alex," she said. "When you

joined us, I was the only one. You were manipulative, you were secretive, but I said you should stay. I said you would never hurt me!"

"Then perhaps you should have reconsidered placing yourself between me and Marie!" His face flared with fury as he shouted, his eyes wide and wild. "You never supported my quest, and I was fine with that! I'm not so weak as to require it! But you respected my decision and let me make it myself!"

Mia threw her hands out to the side. "That's because your decision never included the destruction or subjugation of the entire world, Alex!"

"It's still my choice to make."

"As it is mine to stop you."

Alex's expression settled back into the firm determination that seemed more suited to Felix. "Then prove your will greater than mine."

Ice formed from the air itself, a transition Mia still had difficulty performing under duress. She knew better than to try and control them, at least while Alex still held the sword, so she tried another technique she had learned from the man, one she took to more easily than deposition. She raised her hand, palm facing Alex, and the air shimmered briefly before her. His ice rebounded from the invisible barrier, not shattering as if striking a wall, but the very Psynergy itself being redirected. They scattered in various directions; she lacked the fine control necessary to control the angle of their reflection.

She still needed some manner of attacking if she wanted to stop him, some means of disarming him. If she could take

hold of the sword, they might be evenly matched. How to get it, though? He was stronger than her in every manner.

But he had not been the only one to master different facets of Mercury.

Mia vanished.

Alex instantly swept his eyes across the landscape, searching for that flash of blue hair she suspected often gave her away, but after a moment, he stopped. The wind picked up again, blending in with the whispering Mia could already hear. With it came the toxins.

Mia had already taken her breath, sealing her body against the foul air that buffeted her face. Enough of the substance still harassed her that she had no desire to introduce more. She stood, unmoving, in the same spot she had vanished, waiting patiently for her moment.

When the leaves twisted along the ground, carried by a small vortex of wind, Mia struck. She dashed forward, using the leaves as cover to her noise and movement, sprinting towards Alex. For a moment, she had a horrifying image of impaling herself upon his blade as she approached, fooled into a sense of security.

She was not the fool. Her hand closed upon the hilt of the sword, Alex's own merely resting loosely on the pommel, and she spun past him, drawing it from the sheath as she moved. The direct contact shattered her cloak once more, but she continued to spin, her other hand finding the hilt as she swung it at Alex's back.

Though he might have fallen prey to her trick, his reflexes had not. He spun counter to her, raising his only defense between himself and his stolen blade.

The sword bit into the spine of the *Tomegathericon,* and for a moment, Mia's heart leapt.

The spine proved as durable as the cover, however. It stopped the blade solidly, though shallow enough that Mia pulled it free as she stepped back. Alex screamed something at her, words she could not make out through her awe.

An awareness of Mercury blossomed in her mind upon contact with the sword. She could feel the concentration of vapor in the air, intuitively knowing how much water she could form by drawing on it. Her Psynergetic senses stretched out further than they had ever gone previously, detecting sources of Mercury's power all around her, such as the well hidden underground and slightly to the left. Was this how Isaac always felt? How could he possibly stand to do anything without his own sword?

Alex's fury gave way to the flames, far too thick for Mia to defend against fully, even with the blade. She needed a better position. Rather than run, she vanished again, this time leaving the area, instead of just sight. She made no attempt to lose Alex, taking three jumps in a straight line.

Her final warp ended with her legs in water up to her knees.

She turned around as Alex appeared on the bank of the river, holding his tome cautiously. Turning the sword upside down, Mia planted the tip into the soft soil at her feet, the river's current sliding smoothly around the blade's edge. The river stretched perhaps only thirty feet at this point, comparatively narrow, but she needed nothing more. A small part of her shook its head, chastising her for needing the sword's power to recognize what she had heard in the background for some time now.

The remaining poison in her body vanished the moment she turned her attention towards it, the might of Mercury around her combining with the sword's fine control to make short work of the toxins. Was that how Alex had kept himself immune? Had he simply used the sword to continuously purge himself, preventing them from taking hold?

It did not matter. Water surged from Mia's feet in thick, airborne tendrils, all shooting towards Alex. Rather than warp away, as she expected him to do, allowing her to simply redirect the streams of water, he raised his hand.

A horrible sound filled the air as something blue and misty shot from it. It tore at Mia's ears as she dropped the water, raising her barrier once more, but the mist ignored it. It spread as it passed through, grinning at Mia in the shape of a skull, then enveloped her.

The woman gasped as her chest tightened and the world turned cold. Her knees buckled, plunging her into the water beside the standing sword, her locked elbows barely keeping her face above the surface. The sides of her vision turned gray as she looked up at Alex again. Images cascaded through her head, far too fast for her to individually comprehend, but her subconscious pieced several of them together on reflection.

She saw herself lying limply on the bank of the river, red water streaming away from her. She saw Alex pulling Mercury's blade from the hands of a charred skeleton, incinerated far beyond recognition. She saw herself slumped against a tree trunk, her face almost black, fingers still resting against her neck alongside the gouges they had ripped.

Her breathing grew shallow and rapid. Pain returned to her chest, deeper and less intense than the one induced by the toxins. Her arms trembled as they held her up, threatening to collapse if she released the lock of her elbows. The claws clenched around her heart twisted their grip further, pulling everything taut.

Mia tried to cry out, but found no voice with which to do so. Alex seemed to hear her regardless and stepped forward to the bank of the river, bending down onto one knee. "Mia..." he said softly. "I... Even now, I want to run to you, to give you my aid." He frowned, shaking his head. "But I cannot. Not completely. Let this be my final gift to you."

Psynergy pulsed from the man again, tuned through the black book. The overwhelming terror faded from Mia's mind, though her body remained unresponsive. The gray at the edge of her vision turned white, crystallizing inward in the same fashion that her frost had moved on the trunk of the tree.

After a moment she realized the white was not spreading across her sight, but her mind. Thoughts became fuzzier, harder to push through. What was Alex doing to her? She could not remember him doing anything of the sort before. Why was he not simply killing her?

The thought confused Mia. Why would Alex be killing her, anyway? He always worked so hard to never come into direct conflict with her, to avoid causing her harm. *Marie*, she thought. It was for Marie.

How had she forgotten that? Had Marie not factored into the other conflicts he had with her? Blinking her eyes rapidly, she tried to force away the cotton she felt filling her mind.

What other conflicts? She knew they existed; why could she not think of one?

Imil came to mind, so she focused on her town. Had they conflicted there? Yes, Imil felt right. What had it been about? Something about her father? No, Alex held him in high regard. Something else with the clan? Yes, the clan, that was it. Who? She knew it wasn't about her father. Megan? No, not Megan, and not...

Not...

Why could she not remember the boy's name?

She flicked through a mental map of Imil, appearing at the boy's house. She could see him clearly, standing in the doorway and waving to her, but she could not pull his name up.

Frustrated, she turned to the house next door, drawing forth its resident as well, but found herself unable to recall his name, either. What was going on? She knew everyone in Imil. Not only had she lived there her entire life, she had visited every house for treatment at least once - some many times. A name would slip her mind every now and again, especially when exhausted, but never that of her own apprentice.

She jumped to other houses, finding their owners all nameless. As she moved, she realized their faces grew less distinct, as well. Why was she simply seeing Isaac's face on one? They bore similarities, she knew, but to have completely replaced his face with Isaac's?

Mia pulled away from Imil and out of her thoughts. She stared at Alex, willing her mind to focus, as she tried to pull

his sister's face to her mind. His own face swam for a moment, teasing her, but the girl's face refused to appear.

What was her name?

My memories, she realized in horror. *He's destroying my memories. If I can't remember why we're fighting, he has no need to kill me.*

She clung to the thought of Megan, firmly fixing the girl in her mind, but even as she did, she felt other memories slipping through her fingers. She hopped to the thoughts of her friends, easily able to hold Isaac, Garet, and Ivan in her mind at once, but when she tried to return to her apprentice, she found the girl's name gone. What was Jenna's brother's name? Why did Piers look just like Alex?

Nothing stopped the empty whiteness from spreading. She could not possibly hold it all in her mind at once, not at the detail required to keep it from vanishing. It spread like a fog, enveloping everything but that which she faced directly. Would she soon find herself alone in the white? Would she even remember her own name?

Hopelessness settled in, filling the numb void the fear had left behind. Was this supposed to be preferable to death? Losing everything that bound her to friends and family? Losing everything that made her *her?*

She could not accept that. She pushed aside Megan, pushed aside Alex, pushed aside everyone she knew in favor of one, single, solid memory.

As everything turned white, Olaf Magnarsen stood before her.

Mia sat back onto her calves, staring up at her father. She took in his long, flowing hair, a standard for most Imilian men, though his did not smooth out as finely as Alex's. He wiggled his thick mustache at her, as if he had just told her an amusing joke. His enormous fur coat swept around his feet as he crossed his arms, watching her with eyes that never seemed to lose their sharpness, even on his deathbed.

"Father..." she whispered. "Help me..." She could not remember what she needed help with. "He's going to..." She could not remember who he was, or what he was going to do. "I have to..." She could not remember what she had to do.

Olaf watched her in silence. He had some advice for her, some piece of wisdom that would show her the way. He always did. She had inherited their town and clan far earlier than she had any right to, and only his advice kept her from screwing things up too badly. In her darkest moments, when she thought Imil would wither and die because of her failures, his voice cradled her, lifting her back to her feet and pointing her in the right direction.

But he never spoke to her from beyond that eternal veil. She merely took his words from memory, and now she remembered none of them.

Her father crouched before her, taking one of her hands in his own. Despite their enormous size, she had seen them work with such grace and precision, though none of the memories came to mind. He raised her hand to his lips, placing a soft kiss on the backs of her fingers, then let it go as he stood up. He smiled at her once more before turning and walking away.

Mia's hand remained outstretched, reaching for him as he stepped through the fog. "No..." It swallowed him, eating away at the details of his body and face until nothing remained, save a dark shadow. "Father..."

The figure paused, his outline barely visible. Mia watched, praying for him to return, trying to force him back herself, but found herself unable to recall his appearance. She stared after him, still reaching, and saw another outline step beside him. In contrast to her father, light outlined this smaller figure. It reached out to touch him and his form changed, turning to that of light as well. The two figures blended together into one as they stepped away together, vanishing into the fog.

"Father!"

Light burst from the point where he had vanished, shining so brilliantly that Mia found herself surprised at her ability to stare into it. Even with such radiance, she knew the light she saw could be so much brighter, bright enough to drown the sun itself.

A shout reached her ears.

The fog vanished.

Mia opened her eyes to find herself on the edge of the river again, her hand still outstretched, reaching for her father. Alex had backed away from her, covering his face with his arm and cursing wildly. She looked at him in confusion for a moment before a twinkling on her finger caught her eye.

Three tiny gemstones winked at her. The ring. The ring Alex had found in her father's storeroom, the one that produced light. She must have accidentally triggered it just before her memories were completely-

Her memories!

She scanned her mind quickly. *Alex. Marie. Megan. Ivan. Garet. Isaac.* They were there. As far as she could tell, they were *all* there. She had no idea if Alex's Psynergy had to finish to permanently remove her memories, or if it needed to be constantly maintained, or anything at all about it. Her memories had returned, and most importantly, she retained her most recent one.

Alex snarled something feral at her as he turned towards her, one hand shielding his eyes against another burst of light. He did not step into the water itself; the sword remained planted in the river's bottom, in arm's reach of Mia.

She reached out and grabbed hold of it, then warped. Alex's hand dropped and his eyes opened instantly, ready to scan for her new location, but he paused in confusion when he found Mia's palm mere inches from his face.

Mia had not forgotten her first lesson with the ring. Despite efforts to scale down the intensity of the light, the ring seemed not to respond, instead continuing to output the same, blinding flash. While using it unconsciously, however, her mind noticed something interesting: that flash was not of a fixed strength.

It was just the weakest possible.

Psynergy poured into the ring as she spun her hand around, while she turned her head, closed her eyes, and covered them with her other arm. Even so, the reflection of the light's flash from the water's surface, through all of her precautions, still made her cry out in pain.

It sounded weak and insignificant next to the howl that Alex unleashed. Every bird in the forest, or so it seemed to Mia, took flight at such a horrible sound. He stumbled away from her, one hand clutching at his face as he screamed in pain, the other still clinging to his book.

Mia raised the sword, stepping forward as Alex tripped in his haste, falling to the ground. Her grip tightened on the sword, suspecting Garet would cringe at her form, but she knew it mattered little. As she approached him, she lifted it up fully, preparing to drop it.

Staring at the man rolling on the ground, however, she found herself unable. Despite everything that had happened, she could not bring herself to kill Alex. Behind the screaming, raving man on the ground before her, she still saw the child she had grown up with, the one she supported through loss, the one who had done the same for her. She saw the man who had been willing to paint himself as a villain in order to spare and save her, the man who had woken her from a fatal sleep.

The sword lowered slowly beside Mia. She could not kill him, but she still needed to take the book from him.

Before she could move in for it, Alex's screams formed words. "I won't let you stop me, Mia! I call the Fulminous King! Dullahan Lycoris, fight for me!"

Mia stood in confusion for a moment. They had left Dullahan in the ancient sanctum, per his request, since any trip outside would force his spirit to pass on. He had stated he would remain until they stopped the remaining Anemoi, so that...

...So that they could call upon him in a moment of need.

Lightning snapped down from the clear, blue sky directly in front of Mia, hurling her away from Alex. The sword flew from her hand, spinning off into the thick brush. She landed in the grass on her side, feeling pain shoot up her ribs, but pushed herself back to her feet immediately.

Dullahan stood between her and Alex, his dark blue armor far more menacing when seen in the full light of day, especially when combined with his lack of head. He faced her for a moment, then turned towards Alex. "What is this? Why have you called?"

Alex lifted one hand, pointing in Mia's general direction; he evidently could not see her. "Destroy her!"

"She is not allied with the Anemoi."

"I don't care!" Alex shouted. "I want you to attack her!"

The armored man seemed to hesitate. "Your mind has been pushed by this book."

The book? The book was responsible for Alex's change in temperament? He found the book two days ago, though. Why had he not changed then? *No, that doesn't matter right now!* With a start Mia realized that, so long as Dullahan spoke the truth, severing the connection between Alex and the book could return him to his senses.

"You swore to answer our call! You never specified the terms! Honor your bargain!"

Dullahan remained motionless for a moment, then turned to Mia. "He is correct. I am bound to oppose you. I apologize for this." One great gauntlet rose, the palm facing her.

Mia immediately summoned a barrier once more, though she doubted it could withstand a strike of the former king's power. Only the pure, nigh-absolute power of Mercury's essence had stopped his son's beams of light.

Light did not strike her barrier, however, nor did lightning. Nothing did, even when Mia felt the obvious pulse of Psynergy from Dullahan. In the next instant, her barrier disappeared. Mia gasped as she felt her Psynergy vanish behind a wall, cut off from her mind entirely. She mentally pounded on it, trying to force through the seal, but to no avail.

Dullahan stepped backward, then bowed to Mia from one knee. "And now, I have fulfilled my agreement and expended all my energy left in this world. Farewell, children of Mercury. My own family is waiting."

The twilit armor stopped moving. A shadow that did not exist fell across it as a wind moved in from the river, bending the long grass as it curled around the kneeling figure.

"Payment for the crossing."

Mia turned to Alex as he dropped a coin to his feet, the other hand still firmly gripping the *Tomegathericon.* "I call you from across the Phlegethon, the Acheron, the Styx, the Cocytus, and the Lethe," he said, eyes closed. "Ferryman of the dead, I offer a lost soul up to guide you here." His eyes opened directly upon Mia. "Charon! I summon thee!"

The darkness that covered Dullahan's armor spread, covering everything Mia could see beneath an unnatural shadow. The babble of the river smoothed out into silence, replaced by the steady lapping of water at its edge, a sound more commonly associated with lakes. As she turned to look at it, she found fog rolling in once more, though this time, it

existed outside of her mind. It moved across the water silently, but did not wash up on shore.

From deep within the fog, she heard a bell toll. The ring echoed, bound by the fog, slowly fading from her ears. Before it could completely vanish, it rang once more, only slightly louder.

She spun around. "Alex, what are you doing? The ferryman will take us both!"

"Not so long as I hold his book," Alex said, smiling beneath his sightless eyes as he returned to his feet.

"And do you think he will leave Marie?" she asked. "Do you think he would ever bring someone back across his river? You are toying with a *god!* He will not ever allow her to return!"

The smile vanished. "You have no right to speak of her! You've done everything in your power to ensure she stays dead!"

"You're alive, she's not!" Mia shouted. "Everything I've done, I've done for *you,* Alex! I can't save her, but I can still save you!"

She dashed towards him. He raised his hand, summoning the river of flames once more. It dropped to the grass between them, shooting straight for Mia.

The woman stopped, inhaling deeply, never having intended to reach Alex. She pulled her right arm back to her face, then thrust it forward in the strongest cross she could manage, twisting her foot and hips as Garet had showed her to add power. She exhaled sharply as her arm reached full extension.

The energy of her body poured out from her fist, ripping apart the flames as it moved through the air at an incredible speed. The force of her punch slammed into Alex's face, enhanced by the focused Chi. The man soared backward through the air from the blow, the *Tomegathericon* slipping from his fingers.

It landed in the flames.

Though the active movement of the flames ceased, the grass they had ignited continued to burn, as fire tended to do. Mia watched the pages curl and blacken. She heard feeble protests from Alex, but her strike had caught him completely unprepared; his disorientation made her suspect a minor concussion.

As the fire devoured the book, the tolling bell gradually disappeared, along with the strange shadow and the fog. They did not recede, instead fading from her senses, leaving only the shadow covering Dullahan's armor. Once all else had vanished entirely, the armor dissolved into mist, sinking into the grass and dispersing.

Then the sky turned red.

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Tolbians stared at him as he jogged through the streets, one hand holding his sheathed sword still beside him. He ignored them. He would have liked to sprint after Atropos, but he knew how dangerous it would be to waste energy like that. Besides, he had no idea what she had planned in the city proper; running at full tilt could simply let him pass her by without notice.

She had not landed far in the city, he knew, having watched her, though she easily could have moved elsewhere. The

thick crowds made searching difficult, as well, yet he could hardly do anything to disperse them.

Isaac... Garet... I should never have told you to leave. Thinking that Aisa's presence would protect him... Ivan felt sick at the irony. How had none of them suspected what Atropos had been after? Of *course* she knew about the Golden Sun. But to have drained it from him like that...Was that the secret to their immortality? Did they drain energy from people to sustain themselves? *Stop it,* he thought. *Now isn't the time. Pay attention. She could be hiding anywhere.*

As he rounded a corner onto a main street, though, he found her standing in its center, one hand on a hip, and...talking to a guard? She had removed her bandages, and while he could see none of her wounds, it certainly looked like her. Ivan quickly brought up Jupiter's eye to verify, finding the same multi-colored swirl he once saw belonging to Alex. As he dropped the extra eye, hers flicked over to him, then widened.

"That's him!" she shouted, pointing straight at Ivan. "He's the one attacking me!"

Ivan stared at her for a moment, dumbfounded, but when the guard turned to him, holding his spear a bit more tightly, he felt fury erupt from his stomach. "You... You..."

He stepped towards her, his hand moving towards his sword, but the guard stepped between them, leveling the spear. "That's enough, young man. What's going on?"

"He keeps saying I'm someone from Anemos," Atropos said, clutching at the guard's partner. "Please! He thinks I'm the one responsible for the attack two weeks ago! He means to kill me for it!"

"She's one of their kings!" Ivan shouted, drawing his sword anyway. "She's tricking you!"

The second guard stepped forward, dropping his spear in favor of his own sword. He moved to the side, forcing Ivan to move in order to avoid being flanked. "Drop the sword, boy. Now."

Behind them, Ivan saw Atropos turn and run, pushing aside the crowd that had gathered to watch the spectacle. He stepped forward again, but the guards moved to meet him. He hesitated. He had no desire to hurt them, but Atropos had engineered a very convincing lie. How could he-

Light exploded in his vision as something smashed into the side of his head, sending him sprawling to the ground. Pain erupted in his sword-hand as another something crushed it into the ground. *A boot,* he realized, *someone's stepping on it.* His hand opened after a moment and he could hear his sword sliding across the ground away from him.

A pair of arms looped under his shoulders and hoisted him to his feet as the world began to settle once more. He turned his head and saw a crowd behind him, clapping for the man who had disarmed him and now held him up. Of course. Why would only the guards interfere?

The first guard raised his spear and stepped in close, grinning. "Kids like you shouldn't be playing with swords anyway."

Atropos' shining hair vanished into a sea of people.

The anger that had surfaced earlier, spawned by the absolute unfairness of the situation, filled Ivan now. Psynergy surged from him in a potent gust, picking up everyone around him and hurling them away. He saw the

man that had subdued him rebound off the closed door of a building, while one of the guards smashed into a cart of pottery, shattering much of it.

They recovered quickly. The other guard picked himself up from the ground and immediately moved towards Ivan, his sword raised to strike. Ivan quickly glanced in the direction Atropos had ran, but no sign of her could be seen anymore, not from here. Could he push through all those people? Many of them had watched the exchange, and some would undoubtedly try to intercept him. He would never reach her like that.

Not that they could actually stop him. Even if most of them were Adepts now, he had experience and power. He could toss them aside as easily as he had done moments before, clearing a path with ease. He considered it for a moment, the urgency of the situation weighing on him. In the end, though, he decided to save that option for when he had no choices left to him.

He crouched down, then propelled himself into the air with another burst of wind, landing on the roof of the building beside him. Unbuckling his sword belt and letting it drop, the sheath now useless, he took off at a run along the rooftop, sailing into the air at its edge. He struck the next roof lightly, rolling over his shoulder and straight to his feet again. He moved to the edge, peering down into the street below, searching for that flash of bright gold.

There! Turning down another street!

Too wide for him to simply jump across, Ivan hopped back down to the street. The people below scattered as he did, having followed his movements across the rooftop, but before they could close in again, wind launched him to the

opposite roof. Atropos proved easy to follow, though Ivan had no doubts that she knew where he was; blond hair was often drowned out by the sea of brown in Angara.

As he followed her, more and more heads turned upwards at him. Everyone she passed looked up to the roof, their eyes locking onto him. He glanced backward and found the street packed even more...and slowly flowing in the same direction as Atropos.

He clenched his jaw as he rolled onto the next roof, watching Atropos change direction again. Where was she headed? Was she simply running in random directions? No, he doubted that. While she might not have visited the city in recent centuries, she had seen it from the air, and had some idea of its layout. She had a goal in mind. But what?

When she turned again, doubling back on distance she had just covered, Ivan understood. The river of people thickened, no longer moving towards her, but all moving in the same direction. She was doing something to them all, stringing them all along, and gathering more with every street she touched. Did she intend to use them as shields against him? That made no sense; Atropos needed no shields. Was it simply to taunt him, then? To torture him with more painful decisions?

The buildings ended. Ivan skidded to a stop as Atropos ran into a wide open area; the Fountain Square, he realized. Atropos made for the fountain on the far side, and after a moment's consideration, Ivan leapt from the roof in pursuit. He had an idea, though one with no way of telling if it could even work.

He hit the ground running, the horde gathered by Atropos abandoning their general shuffle in favor of active pursuit.

The sound of hundreds of feet pounding the stone echoed in the square, sounding eerily similar to a stampede. Ivan tuned out their shouts as he ran for Atropos, knowing that he would need to be close.

The king reached the fountain's rim and turned around, backing against it. Ivan had to admit, she certainly looked the part of a frightened woman. She cowered against the low wall, not bothering to move for the stairs on either side behind the fountain.

Ivan came to a stop several feet in front of her, but instead of attacking, he pushed his sleeves up to his shoulders, then held his bare arms out on each side.

The crowd caught up a few moments later, several hands grabbing him and jerking him back slightly. He winced as his arms were bent behind him and pinned against his back, but remained silent. The people pressed in tight around him, and he wondered how many had come along. Enough to fill the square? He could not tell, but he could see them overflowing into his vision, closing up the sides between himself and Atropos.

"Got you, twerp," one of the men behind him said, giving his arm another yank.

Atropos had partially abandoned her helpless persona, instead looking at Ivan carefully. Though he could not feel it at the moment, he knew she would be trying to read his mind, trying to piece together why he had simply given up like that, so Ivan filled his mind with something he knew would take effort to get rid of.

He called Karst.

Like a monster surfacing from the calm of a lake, her vicious grin appeared in his thoughts, free from the dark corner he usually imprisoned her memory within. He heard her cackling laugh, sending goosebumps over his arms and neck while the fear of certain death filled him once more, stripping away his breath.

Atropos frowned. "What are you hiding?"

"Nothing," Ivan said. Karst's eyes on him made it difficult to think straight. "I have only the truth."

"The truth!" Atropos laughed. "How dramatic. What is this truth? That I am one of these Anemoi?"

Ivan shook his head. "No. The truth is that I hate all of you."

The muttering and jeers from around him feel silent at his words. He had their interest. "I've lived my entire life being treated unfairly. I'm a Jupiter Adept. Even now, with all of you as Adepts, I'm still the outcast. I'm still the one people are scared of, even when there are far more terrifying Jupiter Adepts right in front of you. Why would here be any different?"

"Quit your whining," another man said.

"What, are you threatened by the words of a child?" Ivan snapped. "Kalay is full of people like you, people who feel threatened by things they don't understand. Even here, people wanted to kill me for being a Jupiter Adept, simply because of what one person did to the city. Times came when I wished I could kill them all. I thought about it today, about cutting you down to get to her, because she's the one that matters. If I can't stop her, you're all dead anyway."

"See?" Atropos said. "He wants to kill me for this delusion!"

The voices began to pick up again, but before they could, Ivan called over them, "But I didn't. I was angry at you all, but I wasn't going to attack you. Why bother fighting to defend you, then?" He turned back to Atropos. "That's not who I am. That's something she would do. Do you want to see? Truth is the domain of a Jupiter Adept. Shall I peer into her mind and show everyone the truth?"

The Anemian smiled at him, overlaying perfectly with the Proxian in his mind. "Look all you want," she said, stepping closer to him. "Show everyone what a freak you really are!"

Ivan closed his eyes, reaching out with his Psynergy and ignoring the silent mocking in his head. He stretched across the gap between the two, connecting his mind with Atropos'.

Images flashed into his head. He saw Atropos in Tolbi, staring up at the sky in horror as Clotho's attack rained down. He saw her helping move people into an inn, then passing out food to the others outside. He saw her browsing for fruits and vegetables before suddenly being accosted by himself, screaming wildly about saving the city.

He saw all of this, passed along to the crowd via their contact. Pressed as tightly as they were, legs, hands, and arms touched across the square, providing a conduit for Atropos' lies to flow. Ivan could feel her smug satisfaction leaking into them.

Ivan opened his own eyes long enough to see that smirk, then opened Jupiter's eye directly into Atropos' mind.

The images she projected did not so much vanish as were shoved aside by the new ones, incredibly vivid and bright. He saw her as a young child, looking out from the palace of Anemos over the city. He saw her atop a dark Jupiter Lighthouse, her hand outstretched while wind shoved a lone

figure from the aerie. He saw the view of Weyard from the floating city, obscured by clouds. He saw her seated in her throne, looking down at a horrified Sheba. He saw her steal the last pieces of life from her own daughter.

Even more than glimpses of her life, though, he saw *her.* The charade of a helpless and frightened woman shattered as Jupiter's eye combined mind and body into a single image. Blood dripped from her fingers, staining the magnificent cloak she wore, the bird of Anemos emblazoned on each shoulder. Her smile made Ivan want to curl up and cry for the mother he never knew.

Atropos' image turned away from him, the smile fading as she reached her hand out toward a second Atropos. She stood far taller than normal, twice his height, three stacked crowns atop her head. A golden aura blazed out from her, everyone around her seeming monochrome in comparison, even under the eye of Jupiter. Unlike the other version of Atropos, this one ignored Ivan's presence entirely.

The contact broke and the vision faded. Atropos stared at him in surprise for a moment, then smiled. "That was...unexpected. I've never even tried that. Then again, I've never needed to."

Ivan felt the hands holding him loosen and he slipped free, his sleeves falling back into place. "You tricked all of us," he said. "From the very beginning, you were pushing our emotions, weren't you? Subtly bumping us so that we would trust you." A horrifying thought crossed his mind. "You got Alex, didn't you? You pushed him towards saving his sister."

The woman laughed. "He was pathetically easy. While I was syphoning him, the only thing he could think about was his

dear sister. He might have sided with me even without my touch."

"He would never have done that," Ivan said, though a voice in his mind whispered doubts.

"Perhaps not," Atropos said. "It's pointless to argue of what might have been. Let's look to the future, instead! To Weyard's future, specifically."

"What, the one with only Anemians?" Ivan snapped.

Atropos frowned, waving her hand. "Don't be foolish. Genocide is counter-productive. I don't follow Lachesis' theory that limiting the world to a single culture will create peace. Humans merely chose to divide themselves by ability; take that away, and they will simply find another reason for division. Look at the world now, divided not by elemental affinity, but by location."

"And you plan to fix that, somehow?" Ivan asked, trying to ignore the truth in her words. *Isn't that more or less what Piers has said?* "Are you going to unite the world by giving them a common enemy?"

"In a manner of speaking." She leaned back against the fountain. "The Imilian was correct about Clotho: all tyrants will eventually succumb to those they oppress and their sympathizers. I do not aim to be a tyrant, however. I will be a god, the ruler of all of Weyard. War will be quickly and decisively ended by my own hand, because even armies falter before the might of unbound Alchemy." She pointed at Ivan. "And that is where you come in. I cannot possibly manage an entire world by myself. Control, yes, but ruling is so much more than control. I will need people capable of organization, leadership, oversight."

"And you want me." He did not bother to make it a question. For a woman who wanted to conquer the world, she certainly had her plans in order for maintaining her empire. Most conquerors in history spent so much effort on reaching their goals that once they succeeded, they had no idea how to sustain their power. An advantage of being immortal, he supposed.

Atropos smiled at him. "I need people I can trust, Ivan, people like myself."

Ivan's hands curled into fists while Karst laughed at him. "I'm nothing like you."

She shook her head, laughing quietly. "You sound so much like Sheba. You might not be as close to a king as she, but you still carry some royal blood in your veins."

Ivan paused. "I was born in Contigo. My family is from Contigo."

"Yes, but you *are* descended from my firstborn. You didn't think throwing him off Jupiter Lighthouse would *kill* him, did you?" she said. "Surely you know Jupiter's power better than that."

His mind whirred briefly, the crowd around them both forgotten. "That was Yegelos," he said at last. "Yegelos was your son, and he betrayed you when he extinguished the beacon. He's the reason you had to leave Weyard."

Atropos nodded, her lip curling up into a sneer. "One of them, yes. He betrayed me, stole our heritage, and tried to pass it to the commoners of his favored slums: the town you now call Contigo. You have his eyes, you know. I expect most of his descendants do."

Ivan reached for his sword, then remembered its loss on the street. "I hope you don't think you can manipulate me into showing you mercy."

"Mercy? One must be in a position of power to show mercy, Ivan." Atropos spread her arms along the fountain's rim. "You might have won our little game, but that's all it was: a game. You still cannot hope to overcome me."

Psynergy pulsed from her not in a wave, but a blast. The ground picked itself up and heaved like water, tossing people aside with ease. Ivan propelled himself into the air over the rippling stone. He pooled Jupiter Psynergy into his fist as he reached the apex of his jump, then arced down towards Atropos.

She slid to the side with unnatural speed, allowing him to smash his hand against the stone of the fountain. She moved away as he cradled his hand in agony, walking back towards the center of the square. The gathered crowd, most still on the ground, scrambled away from the woman, the tiny circle that had formed growing rapidly again. She laughed at them, flicking her hand out and knocking down some of the ones that had managed to rise with wind.

Ivan grit his teeth and glanced around. The neatly fitted stones of the square, once forming a ground far smoother and snug than regular cobblestones, lay scattered about from where they had ripped free. He could not change their shape, of course, but bricks were dangerous enough simply when thrown. He reached out telekinetically, picking several of them up. The first couple rose easily, but even with his experience, the next few continually added a strain to his mind. He could feel it tighten through his neck, like a rope pulled taut. After reaching the sixth, he knew better than to

risk any more weight, so he threw them forward towards Atropos' back.

She likely sensed the pulses, he realized a moment later. Glancing back at him, she raised a single hand, and all six bricks stopped. The woman stepped back around them towards Ivan, running her hand along the hovering stones. Meeting his eyes as she reached the other side, her hand dropped. The stones resumed their motions, launching into the crowd with cries of pain. As he watched them fly, he recognized what she had done, and remembered an important discovery of his own. *The snowball...*

"You should watch your attacks more," Atropos chastised, several more stones lifting around her. More than Ivan could lift alone. "Collateral damage in a fight is a sign of a lack of discipline." Rather than simply launching them as Ivan had, however, she moved them together. Like pieces of wet clay, the stones melded together into a haphazard boulder, all corners, *then* launched at Ivan. He had no time to clear the rock with a simple leap.

He had spent a lot of time learning how to move around a fight quickly. Air pressure around him shifted violently, rising on one side and dropping to the other as he jumped. In addition to the sudden gale of wind that aided his sidewards movement, the vacuum opposite it dragged him, as well. He shot to the side nearly as fast as Atropos' boulder itself.

The maneuver left him no time for a competent landing. He tucked his chin into his chest as he landed on the loose, upturned bricks, feeling them dig into his side, back, arms, and legs as he bounced and rolled to a stop. Cautiously he stood up, moving everything quickly; nothing seemed broken, though he knew bruises would cover his body by the

day's end. *You have to live to get those bruises,* Karst whispered to him.

His eyes traced the path of the melded stones, finding the rim of the fountain shattered where it had struck. Water poured out into the square, some of it sinking into the soil previously covered by the bricks, but the earth was too tightly packed to accept much of it. Water lapped at his boots as it spread across the ground, stretching out quickly. He looked up at Atropos, a smirk of his own stealing his face. "Not very disciplined, Your Highness."

She cocked her head to the side. "What makes you think that was collateral?"

Ivan paused for a moment too long, wondering about her words. The water at his feet launched up, along with the water nearby, spiraling around his chest and freezing, binding his arms. The ice was not thick, nor had fully encased him, but he lacked the physical strength and momentum to break free from even such a mediocre prison. After a moment of struggling, for which he was rewarded with another of Atropos' laughs, Ivan realized he did not need strength. He threw himself to the side , shattering the skeletal ribbons of ice enough to slide out of the remainder.

Ivan pushed himself back to his feet, but the throbbing pain in his shoulder collapsed his arm. To his surprise, a hand grabbed his arm, pulling him the remainder of the way. He glanced to his side as he rose and his jaw dropped. "Kraden?"

The old scholar moved his hand to Ivan's shoulder as he stepped forward, standing beside the boy. "You're a monster, Atropos."

Atropos cocked her head. "A monster? Are you certain? What do you think Clotho would be doing to this city in my place? Do you think he would simply walk through it, leaving it intact? Do you think Lachesis would let these commoners live, refusing his rule? I bring order to a world that will succumb to-"

"You are a cruel king," Kraden snapped.

Atropos seemed taken aback at the interruption, but smiled at him. "Lord Kraden, I know you're-"

"Don't interrupt me," he said. Ivan had never seen the man so angry. "You criticized Clotho for viewing the world as his toy, yet you do the same! Don't try and twist words to hide your intent. I saw who you are, just as everyone else did. You enjoy making people suffer. Why else would you drive the citizens of Tolbi to attack Ivan, instead of simply doing so yourself? His life is nothing more than a game to you! All of these peoples' lives are simply games!"

Atropos' jaw ground her teeth together. Raising her hand, she pointed a glowing finger at the man beside Ivan. "If you are so insistent on it, then I can certainly play a monster for you."

Ivan had little time to react before light surged from Atropos' fingertip, but he already had a plan in place. Not bothering to even turn and look at the man, Ivan threw his own Psynergy towards Kraden in a rough wave, negligent of the energy he expended in doing so.

The bolt of light struck the scholar full on.

Ivan exhaled slowly, then turned. Kraden stood completely still, his face locked into an expression of stubborn fury. No mark of the bolt of light marred him. Ivan released his

mental grip on the man and time returned to him. Cheers erupted from around the square as Kraden thanked him wordlessly, though Ivan doubted they knew what had happened.

He could see them growing restless, pressing in once more. They needed no motivation from Atropos this time; Kraden had proven just as competent a leader as Babi, except significantly more amiable. The people loved him. They would not let this woman, this liar, attack him without coming to his defense.

If they did, they would be slaughtered with ease. "Kraden, you need to get everyone away," he muttered, stepping in front of him. "Get them somewhere safe."

"And what, leave you to fight Atropos alone? She's too strong, Ivan."

Ivan nodded. "Strong enough to likely kill everyone else in this square. I'm the only one who even has a chance."

"A chance?" Atropos laughed. "You might be a hundred times stronger than these people, Ivan, but you're still nothing to me."

The earth rose up, enveloping his boots in stone. He glanced down in surprise, tugging on them to try and escape, but the stone tightened, sealing his feet inside. He returned his gaze to Atropos, finding her raising a hand. "Go, Kraden! Please!"

Lightning snapped from her hand towards him. Ivan caught it with his own hand, channeling it down through the same side leg into the ground. Pain erupted inside his body as the bolt moved, feeling as if someone had drawn a red-hot poker along his skeleton. He gasped out as he tried to fall to his knees, but the stone prison on his feet held. He pitched

forward at the waist instead, then pushed back up with his hands, wincing at the pain in his shoulder.

No sooner had he stood back up than lightning flashed once more. He reacted on instinct, passing it through the other side of his body. He could not stop the scream that his mouth released, though he wanted to deny the woman that pleasure.

He stayed down for a few moments longer than he needed. Kraden had returned to the crowd, pushing them back. Good. Ivan turned his thoughts to Atropos. His own lightning would be useless against her; even if she chose not to reflect it with that barrier, their difference in power ensured that discharging it through her own body would not even make her blink. Wind and sound, easily canceled out, were no better. In a straight fight like this, with no chance to position himself or distract her, she would always win.

He could not give in, though. Not to her. As he rose to his feet, he flung his hand out, hurling lightning at the woman. In the same motion, he grabbed up more fallen bricks with his mind, launching them behind the lightning.

Atropos raised two hands, and two separate Psynergy signatures pulsed from her. Mercury and Venus clamored for attention in his senses as the lightning rebounded away, while the stones stopped before touching her. As their eyes met amidst the floating bricks, Ivan realized why she had used Venus Psynergy, this time.

Immediately he called upon the Jupiter Psynergy she had neglected. Had he not been prepared for it, he never would have caught the first brick with his mind, halting it in midair. The second and third met similar fates, hovering only a few feet away.

Before he could duck and release them, however, something yellow darted between them, striking him in the chest. No new pain erupted anywhere, but all of his muscles instantly tensed, tightening so thoroughly that he could not move them.

Atropos moved closer, smiling. "This power is fantastic, even without Mars. I just have so much *control."*

Ivan waited for her to attack, maintaining his hold on the bricks. Despite the forced tension pulling at his entire body, he could feel the strain of his Psynergy as a growing discomfort in back of his neck.

"You seem to be having a much more difficult time," Atropos said. "Do you know why?"

He said nothing; the paralysis included his mouth. The discomfort had grown to a dull ache.

"You're a destroyer, Ivan, just like me. That's what Jupiter Psynergy *is:* destruction. We do not build. We do not heal. Our powers are geared for destruction." She watched his silent struggle for a moment. "You should not fear it so much. Destruction is a natural process of nature, just as death is of life. We destroy so that new creations might be born, stronger and sturdier than the previous."

Pain stabbed up into the back of his skull. Temporal Psynergy took incredible effort to maintain. Had Atropos continued to actively try to move the bricks, she would have added her own will to them and shattered Ivan's resistance in seconds. She had no need to, however.

"It's why you could never beat me, Ivan, even if our strength was matched," she said. "You simply don't understand your own powers."

His concentration snapped. The three bricks slammed into him at the same time, one in the stomach, one in his chest, while the third smashed into his face. The paralysis lifted at the time of impact, likely on Atropos' command, as he struggled to regain his breath. Blood sprayed from his nose and everything flashed white as he fell back, landing limply among the remaining stones. He had no idea how long he lay there, his mind struggling to focus on any single task through the pain and exhaustion.

Just as he resumed normal breathing, the air vanished again. Not from his lungs, this time, but entirely. He lay gasping on the ground, panic threatening to settle in as his head turned light once more. He tried pulling the air to him with Psynergy, but too much trauma clouded his mind.

The air returned in a great rush as his vision faded, washing over him like cool water on a summer day. He gulped it down greedily, relishing its sweet taste. A pair of gentle hands pulled him back up to a standing position, supporting him, while a familiar presence danced through his body, soothing everything it touched. *Mia*...

His vision cleared to show Atropos holding him up, smiling. "Aisa might have taken care of my injuries, but I still suffered a lot of pain getting myself here. I think you owe me a little bit more than this, Ivan." She released the front of his shirt and moved back a few steps, then pointed her hand at him. "Let's start from the top again, shall we?"

The stone around Ivan's feet dissolved to sand.

He had no strength to throw himself aside, so he simply allowed himself to collapse to the ground. Lightning snapped overhead, missing him, but Atropos had no time to try again.

"Get away from him, you bitch!"

Ivan rolled his head to the side in time to see Isaac nearly fly from the wall behind the fountain, the massive blade of Prox in his hands. Atropos flitted to the side, the sword missing her by inches. The ground shifted and pushed Isaac to the side to follow her, nullifying the sharp change in momentum, but her wings appeared once more and brought her airborne.

Isaac pulled one hand from the sword, its enormous blade dipping to rest on the ground as a result, and reached out in Atropos' direction. Ivan felt a powerful pulse of Venus Psynergy from Isaac, and the Anemian dropped slightly. An instant later her own pulse followed, restoring her height.

She took advantage of Isaac's surprised hesitation and darted towards him before Ivan could call out a warning. One hand closed around Isaac's sword arm, while the other closed around his throat. "Thank you for saving me the trouble," she said, smiling as she began to drain him.

A moment later, the pulses ceased. The smile dropped from Atropos' face. "Where is it?" she shouted. "Where is the Sun? What have you-"

A terrifying roar and a searing heat interrupted her, courtesy of the brilliant beam that carried her halfway across the square. Garet stepped down from the stairs beside the fountain as it faded, smirking. "Oops, sorry, did I forget to say something to ruin my surprise attack?" When his eyes spotted Ivan, the smirk faded, however. "Ivan!"

A shriek from the center of the square drew their attention. Garet's beam had not only smashed Atropos into the ground, but dragged her along it, leaving a small gouge in the disrupted stones. At the end of the scar, though, the king

had returned to her feet, the simple clothes she wore burned and torn. Lightning crackled in the air around her. "You think what I did to him was bad? You'll be begging for death alongside him!"

Ivan tried to push himself back to his feet. They could do this, now. Between the three of them, they could find a way to stop her. And if Mia returned, too... Well, the four of them had fought worse things, hadn't they?

Before he could rise, Isaac passed him, both hands holding the golden blade to the side. "You're not touching him," Isaac snapped, planting his feet. "I won't let you! *I will never let you!"* He raised the sword above him and the steel shimmered once, then burst into a radiant, white light.

Ivan flinched back from the flash, a dull roar filling his ears. For a moment, he thought Garet had assaulted Atropos with another of his beams. *No*, he realized, *that's not Garet. That's Isaac.*

He opened his eyes, shielding them with his hand to block the sword and found Isaac's mouth open in one continuous scream. Some massive piece of Psynergy had formed around the sword, growing with every second. It already dwarfed the signature Ivan had felt from Atropos, who stood shielding her eyes as well. The crowd had all but cleared the square by now, but Ivan could see them watching still, hanging out from windows and rooftops, crowding the mouths of streets and alleys. Not even Kraden could stop that.

The light vanished from the Proxian blade and a horrible dread filled Ivan's stomach in the same instant. His gaze snapped towards Atropos, but he felt no Psynergy

emanating from her; confusion and wariness covered her face instead.

And then, faintly, he felt it. An impossible distance away, he could sense a dim Mars presence. He knew how to gauge a rough length to such signatures, though; this one came from miles upon miles out. What could he possibly feel from so far away? Or rather, how unimaginably powerful must it be?

His eyes closed briefly, following the source, then turned upwards. In the center of the sky, far, far above them, he saw something amidst the sea of blue. It almost looked like a star, though even the brightest of those could not be seen alongside the midday sun. It glittered red, not white.

The dread gave way to horror, his stomach nearly turning over. Had Isaac summoned the Dragon Queen herself?

Atropos feels the same thing, Ivan realized, glancing over at her. She tore her eyes from the sky to look at him again, then pulled a smile together, licking her lips. "You should have simply run, Ivan."

In the next instant, her body vanished into a spray of loose waves of Psynergy, Garet's shouts following. Isaac's eyes remained fixed on her former location, his sword slowly lowering back to rest on the ground.

Ivan looked up, finding the star slightly brighter. "Help me up! We have to get out of here!"

"What is that thing?" Garet asked, turning his head up as well.

"Hurry up!" Ivan screamed, using the exertion to force himself to his feet. Every part of his body felt sore, some more than others, his head still pounding in pain, but he

shoved it all aside and began to hobble to the opposite end of the square, where most of the people gathered. *"Get me to them! Now!"*

His urgency seemed to prompt the other two, who moved after him. They each scooped beneath one arm, picking him up and beginning to run. Ivan glanced up again, the red star even brighter. The sky around it had turned red, rapidly stretching across the remainder.

"We're not gonna make it!" Garet shouted. "Ivan, get us outta here!"

He turned forward as they moved across the center of the square, then felt for the star's location. *He's right. We don't have enough time.* "We have to!" he said aloud. He could see Kraden standing in the middle of the street, just off the square. "We have to get to them!"

Garet began to grunt as he sprinted, Isaac matching his speed, but he shook his head. "No way! Won't make it! Teleport! Now! *Ivan! Do it!"*

The boy cast one more glance up into the sky as the star resolved into a shimmering shape the size of the sun, and growing even more rapidly. When he turned forward again, he met Kraden's eyes. The scholar nodded once, then closed them.

Ivan screamed. The Mars presence blanketing over them all now nearly stifled his own Psynergy, so hard it was to focus through. Such concentration had always been his strong point, though. He linked the throbbing pain to fuel his Psynergy, using each pulse as timing to control his draw of energy.

He closed his eyes so he wouldn't see all the faces staring at him as they vanished.

Chapter 20: Children of War

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 20 – Children of War

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Jenna stood in silence, the shattered ruins of a building before her. The walls at her feet had buckled after a moment of resistance, she knew, shattering into pieces before the roof collapsed upon them. Glass crunched beneath her feet as she stepped up onto the wreckage, bending down. She tugged a piece of cloth from beneath a section of the broken roof, then shook the thick layer of dust from it. Red and yellow stared up at her.

She let the cloth go and it drifted down to lie across the rubble. Raising her eyes again, she looked out across the destroyed city. Out here, along the edges of the destruction, she could still make out where buildings once stood. As she followed the shingles upward and looked further out, though, the fleet of half-sunken houses gave way to a calm sea of dirt and rock and glass. Nothing remained at that distance.

The crater lay beyond that.

Jenna could only look at it for a few seconds before her stomach began to turn and the bile began to rise. She turned around and stepped down to the ground, taking deep

breaths to quell her nausea. Before it could fully subside, however, something compelled her to turn around again, to take one last look at the destruction.

She hesitated for a moment, then followed the roof once more, stepping up onto the crest. Instead of seeing the city laid out before her, she found herself standing on the edge of the crater itself. A shingle fell from the roof and clattered down the ragged walls of the crater, the sound echoing throughout the silence as it tumbled down to sit at the very center.

It sat still for a moment, but before the last echoes could fade, something bubbled up from beneath it. The water enveloped the shingle, pooling up in the crater. The puddle grew larger, and as it did, the color grew from the black of a shade-covered liquid to the dull red of blood.

The level rose at a constant rate, despite the widening of the basin it filled. A buzzing filled Jenna's ears as she watched in horror, faces forming in the blood. Each one bubbled up in silent screams before bursting, sending a spike of pain through her head. Each one stared at her with their sunken, crimson eyes, crying out for her to help them with their expressions.

She stepped backwards off the roof. A soft splash jerked her gaze down to find blood oozing from the ground itself, as well. It welled up and began to run down the sides of the crater, joining the growing pool. Jenna stepped back again, the blood sloshing up against her ankles. On the next step, her foot found no ground. It fell into a pit and her body followed, splashing down into the pool of blood. The black sky turned red as she fell, sinking into the ocean that had formed around her.

Jenna shouted, sitting up in her bed.

Blankets rustled from beside her, followed by a thump on the floor. "Jenna!"

The Valean said nothing. She placed one hand to her chest, finding her heart still pounding, and her other to her forehead, finding it coated in a thin layer of sweat. To her side, only the faint outline of Sheba's head poking over the edge of the bed showed against the utter darkness of the room.

Jenna threw the blanket off herself and slipped out of the bed, moving to the window. She pushed the drapes aside and looked out on Kalay, outlined by starlight. Through the thick sheet of rain, she saw the flickers of firelight, or possibly candlelight; distance and darkness made differentiating the two impossible. She doubted the news of Tolbi had reached anywhere yet. Over the next week, however, as ships fled across the Karagol, she expected the word would spread like a plague.

Small, barefoot feet padded across the wooden floor towards her. "Jenna? Are you okay?"

She turned around and threw her arms around Sheba, pulling the girl to her. Sheba's arms wrapped around Jenna's waist in return, and the two hugged in silence as Jenna fought to bring her body under control.

A lamp lit across the room, casting a gentle glow throughout. Jenna released the younger girl and turned to the light, finding Mia watching her. Hama stood behind her, half-hidden by the shadows cast by Mia's lamp. "Was it a nightmare?" Mia asked.

Jenna met her eyes, then looked down, nodding. She felt Sheba's hand worm into hers, squeezing it.

"It was about Tolbi." Hama did not ask, though Jenna wondered what made her so certain.

Mia stepped over to her and guided her back to her bed, gesturing with the lamp. "You should sit down. Would you like some water?"

Jenna nodded and soon found a globe of water in the air. She remembered the sphere being a common technique of Alex's and bit down on the comment before she could mention him. "Thanks. I... Thanks."

Sheba sat down beside her and wrapped her arm around the other girl. "Are...you okay?"

"I saw Tolbi again," she whispered. "I saw blood flooding it, and the people screaming for help. I saw..." The curtain she found came to mind again, and she found herself unable to finish.

Mia set the lamp down on a nightstand and sat down on Jenna's other side, brushing the Valean's unbound hair behind her ear and taking her hand. "This isn't your fault, Jenna. There was nothing you could have done."

"Does it need to be my fault for me to feel bad about it?" she snapped. "It doesn't matter whose fault it is. It's still horrible. Can't I just feel bad that it happened?"

"Of course you can," Mia said, in the same tone Jenna knew her to use when talking to patients.

She stood. None of the other girls followed as she left the room, wandering off into the darkness that filled Hammet's

palace. She knew some servants would be awake, but they tended to remain in the basement levels, near the kitchens, unless summoned.

The rain pounded against the roof, the sound unnerving Jenna further. She trailed her fingers along the wall until she reached the staircase, heading downstairs and muting the sound. She paused at the bottom, leaning against the wall and closing her eyes. The low rumble of thunder still pierced the walls, but Jenna found that simple to ignore. She did not fear the sound, as Sheba did; she simply disliked it.

Why did Tolbi's destruction weigh so heavily on her mind? Mia had spoken the truth: she had no part in it, nor any means to have stopped it. She and Piers had found out about the city last, though thankfully Kalay had been their first choice for a possible meeting point.

She shook her head. Even her own mind tried to distract her from the...event. She would have felt bad had any city been destroyed so thoroughly as Tolbi had, but she knew people there, and it struck her so much harder because of that. People she had met and spoken with, laughed and argued with. They were not an endless sea of unfamiliar faces, but a small group that she could name.

Kraden stood in front of them all.

A small, indescribable noise escaped her mouth. She covered it with her hand, feeling the tears return as her body shook with sobs. She pushed her back against the wall, knowing that if she did not brace herself, she would fall to her knees.

He was gone, wasn't he? Her teacher, her friend. Though he had been with her for only four short years, not even a quarter of her life, and a tiny fraction of his own, she felt as

if she had lost someone she had known since her birth. She could trace most of her knowledge to him. Not merely alchemy, but how to read and write, how to manipulate number systems, how various parts of the human body worked.

A chuckle broke through the sobs as she recalled her first lesson on that, and Kraden's exasperated explanation that there was more than 'that conversation'. She could not imagine how difficult he must have found it, a man who had spent decades studying the sciences, trying to explain them to a bunch of kids.

"Jenna?"

She opened her eyes, finding nothing more than a faint silhouette in the darkness. "Isaac? What are you doing up?" After a moment of silence, she said, "Yeah, stupid question, I guess."

He made a small noise and turned away, walking into one of the rooms. Jenna paused for a moment, then followed. He did not turn back to her as she entered Hammet's study, but stepped over to the vacant desk, trailing his fingers across the wood.

Jenna glanced around the room, not wanting to sit down; it reminded her too much of another study. "I was just thinking about...about Kraden. About when he started teaching us biology."

"Yeah?"

She chuckled again, though the sound fell flat against the oppressive silence surrounding them. "I've never seen your face so red."

Isaac made a noise of polite amusement, but did not turn from the great window behind the desk. This one lacked any elaborate metalwork, simply looking out over the town below.

All of Jenna's concerns and issues seemed trivial. "Isaac?" she whispered, the night amplifying her voice.

He did not respond this time. His eyes remained motionless in the window's reflection as his hand fell from the desk, curling up beside him.

Jenna moved towards him, stretching out her arms to hug him. The moment she touched him, though, Isaac flinched away.

"Don't," he whispered, shaking his head. "I'm fine."

She resisted the urge to reach for him again. "No you're not."

He said nothing, turning back to the window.

"Please, Isaac, talk to me," Jenna said.

"I said I'm fine," he said. "Don't worry about me."

Jenna's fist slammed into the window's frame before she could stop herself, the glass panes rattling. Isaac jumped away from the noise, reaching for a sword that he had not worn. "Don't you *dare* tell me not to worry about you!" Jenna pulled her hand away from the wall, but her feet remained rooted in place. "You have no right to tell me that, after everything we've been through! You're as much a brother to me as Felix!"

Isaac did not meet her eyes. His gaze shifted from his own boots to the corner of the room, then to Jenna's bare feet.

The wind shifted outside, driving the rain into the window. Light flashed in the distance.

"You're bleeding."

Jenna looked down. A few drops of blood lay splattered on the wood beneath her hand. She pulled it up, finding the skin of her knuckles torn up from her outburst. The welled blood spilled over and dribbled down between her first two fingers.

Isaac's hands appeared before her, gently taking hold of her hand. He wiped up what had spilled with his sleeve in silence, then closed his hands over Jenna's. The warmth of Venus Psynergy filled her hand, so different from the refreshing chill of Mercury. It made his hands feel even warmer in the cool night.

When he pulled them away, the sheared skin had shriveled, while the raw skin had scabbed over. Jenna brushed the former from her knuckles and looked up again to thank him, but the door swung shut instead.

She stood and stared at it for a long time, the only sound that of rain striking the window.

What was he doing? Why wouldn't he talk to her? He never kept anything from her. He trusted her with everything, as he did Garet, ever since they could walk. She wanted to help him. She *needed* to help him.

All her own feelings about Tolbi came flooding back now. Jenna felt her shoulders shake and eyes burn, Tolbi and Isaac too much for her to bear together. She leaned over the desk and braced her hands against it, locking her elbows as she bowed her head and let the tears flow.

How many people lived in Tolbi? Kraden had told her once, but she could not remember. Her heart twisted again as she realized that; what a fantastic way to honor his memory, by forgetting the things he had taught her. What kind of person was she? Why hadn't she paid more attention to him? Did she think he would always be around to tell her things again?

No, she knew he would someday leave them. Her head did, at least. Her heart pushed the thought aside. "Don't worry about it," it said. "You've got plenty of time with him. Don't dwell on it."

Now, all she could do was dwell.

He would never again explain to her how snow formed.

He would never again join her in making fun of Felix.

He would never again shout at her for interrupting his alchemists while they worked.

He would never again give her a piece of chocolate he'd kept hidden, a small smile to accompany the special gift for her, and her alone.

He was dead.

Kraden was dead.

A sob burst from Jenna's mouth as her arms gave out. She pushed herself away from the desk and collapsed to the floor behind it, curling up into a ball against the wall. Her chest heaved as she sniffed back the snot in vain, destined to meet her sleeve instead.

This had to be a dream, she thought. Only a dream could explain why things seemed so *wrong* right now. She would wake up in her bed in the morning, and Kraden would be fine, and Tolbi would be there. Maybe even the Anemoi were part of the dream. She would wake up in Vale to the sound of Garet shouting outside her window, calling for her to join him for a morning run. They'd do a lap around the town and cool off by laughing about Isaac's laziness. He would join them a little later, his lopsided grin in place, and they would find something to occupy them for the day.

It felt good. Jenna clung to the image, squeezing it to her chest. If she believed it hard enough, it would happen. It had to happen. Or maybe she would just think it happened. Mia had told her about some people who invented fake worlds for themselves to avoid something in their lives. Jenna had no objection to that.

The door opened. Jenna recognized the footsteps, but stayed on the floor. A few moments later, a smaller body lay down behind her, a face nuzzling into her neck. Warm breath tickled the fine hairs there every few seconds. Jenna reached up and seized the hand that laid itself across her shoulder, pulling it to her chest in place of her thoughts.

The tears and the rain both subsided over time. Jenna felt the girl behind her shift a few times, trying to restore feeling to her arm without moving too much; Jenna's had long ago gone numb. A dull pain throbbed in her shoulder.

"I just want to leave it," Jenna whispered. "I just want to go somewhere that I don't have to worry about this. I don't want to fight anymore."

Shift. Fingers stroked the hair atop her head. "Soon," Sheba whispered to her. "We will. Soon."

"No, not soon." Jenna rolled over, pushing herself to her feet with the arm that she could move. Needles crept across the other one as blood returned. "I'm tired of soon. I'm tired of fighting. I'm tired of people getting hurt and dying. I..." She shook her head. "I've never wanted anyone to die before. Never. Do you know what I want for Atropos?" Jenna turned to stare at Sheba, who had sat up on the floor. "I want to kill her. I want to kill her myself. I want to go back in time and kill Clotho. I want to kill Lachesis, too. I want them all dead, and I want to be the one to do it. I want to give them back all the pain they've caused."

Jenna realized she was shaking. One of her hands had clenched at her side, while the other fingers twitched in their attempt to do the same. She made no attempt to dispel the rage, to put it aside. She wanted it. All of it. That rage belonged to Kraden, to Iodem, to Tobias, to all those that had died. It was not hers to put aside, but to deliver upon those who had created it.

Sheba stood, wrapping her arms around the girl. "I don't like you like this," she murmured. "You're not like this, Jenna."

"Maybe I should be," she said, staring over Sheba's head out the window, her arms unmoving. "Maybe we should all be more like the kings. Maybe if we had been, this would never have happened."

"You don't know that." Sheba stepped back, her hands grabbing Jenna's. "You don't want to be like them. They're... They're cold and mean and ruthless. They're evil."

Jenna's eyes flicked to Sheba's. "What about you? Would you kill them?"

Sheba hesitated.

"Could you kill them?" Jenna pressed. "Do you have that in you?"

"I don't know," Sheba muttered, looking down.

Jenna stepped forward, the younger girl retreating into the wall. "You don't know if you're able to kill your own father? How can you not know that?"

"He's not..." Sheba trailed off.

"I think you could," Jenna said, backing away from the girl. "It's in your blood, apparently. Clotho and Atropos have no problem killing family. Why would you?" She turned and walked into the hallway, leaving Sheba alone in silence.

Guilt, shame, and anger ripped at her as she walked, no destination in mind. The walls blurred in the darkness as tears filled the corners of her eyes. Would she run out? She doubted it. She had not run out when her the river swallowed her family.

She ran into no one this time, and no one followed her. When she threw open the front doors of the palace, exiting into the light rain the storm had faded to, the guards watched her wordlessly. She stared down at Kalay for a moment, thinking of losing herself in the city for a while, but turned right instead. The dark forest loomed ahead of her, but she had no intention of entering it. Rounding the corner of the building, she leaned against the wall and slid down it until she plopped into the mud.

This felt right, she thought, closing her eyes and as the rain rolled down her face. No wonder Isaac refused to talk to her. Would she have cut him with her words as deeply as she cut Sheba? Did she think it would make her feel better about everything?

She had no idea.

Here, at least, the gods' tears would hide her own.

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Ivan opened his eyes to a dark room. He glanced around in confusion for a moment, before recognizing his own room in Kalay. Someone had drawn the shades closed, the afternoon sun filtering into the gaps. He pushed himself to a sitting position, wincing at the pain that the movement woke in him.

"Ivan!"

Turning his head to the side, he found Garet seated beside the bed. "Garet…?" he said. He looked around the room once more, then down at himself, finding dark marks all over his visible skin. He reached up and dabbed his own face, finding the skin puffy and tender. His fingers grazed his nose once, a spear of pain thrust through his head at the contact. "What happened?"

Garet frowned. "Hey, just lie back down. Don't worry about it."

Ivan looked down at his hands, turning the palms up at himself. The haze of sleep should have cleared by now. He tried to think back, tried to pull out the most recent memory could find. He remembered being in Tolbi, for certain. They had gone there after rescuing Sheba. He remembered some of the others leaving, and remaining there with the rest. His memories felt fuzzy, so he latched onto them at that point and tried to continue forward from there. Isaac and Garet had left, he remembered that, though the exact reason eluded him at the moment. Something about-

Atropos!

He turned back to Garet, opening his mouth to ask where the woman was, then stopped. The fog receded more, clearing the way for more of his memories. Her daughter, Aisa, had come, and then... And then...

Everything else followed. Alex, Mia, Aisa, Atropos, Tolbi, and...

Ivan tried to call out to Garet, but his voice cracked. He swallowed and tried again. "Garet... What happened to Tolbi?"

Garet said nothing.

Ivan sat in the darkness for a long time, knowing the answer he would get. "It's gone, isn't it?" he murmured, closing his eyes.

He heard Garet shift beside him. "Ivan, you shouldn't worry about that right now."

His eyes snapped open again. "Mia! Where is she? Is she okay? Did she-"

A hand pressed against his chest, forcing him to lie down. "She's okay. She was far enough away to stay safe."

Ivan sighed and compromised into a slouch against his headboard. "And...Alex? What about him?"

Garet said nothing for a moment after sitting back in his chair. "He's here. Mia's taking care of him. She says some book they found made him go crazy."

A book? Alex often carried one around, he knew, but never into a fight. Didn't he have one when he attacked, though? Something had allowed him to channel new Psynergy; he recalled Alex chasing Mia away from the road with rivers of fire, a power not available to him even while he held most of the Golden Sun. But... "Atropos was manipulating him, though. She... She was in our heads the whole time, reading our thoughts and pushing our emotions to keep us from being too suspicious. After she drained the Sun from him, she pushed him just enough that he put his sister above Mia."

"She was defending him too," Garet said, his tone clear that Mia had done so from more than just a verbal assault.

"I'm not..." Ivan shook his head. "Do you know what it's like, having someone inside your mind like that? Not knowing whether your thoughts and reactions are your own? Alex...was actually the one who warned me about that."

"So he should have known better."

"No, it's more than that, it's..." He fumbled for the right words. "Atropos' Psynergy is strong, but this isn't about strength. She knew just how to nudge people in the tiniest ways, things that they would reasonably do themselves, so that they wouldn't ever know the difference. She knew exactly how we thought, and used that against us." The boy sighed. "Especially me. All of this... It's all my fault."

Garet snorted. "How the hell do you figure that?"

Ivan leaned forward again, drawing his knees up beneath the blanket and leaning onto them, ignoring the sharp pain in his chest. "Kraden didn't make it out, did he?"

Silence answered him again.

"I saw it. In a dream," he said. "That dream I had about Alex killing Mia... Everything came back to that. It was supposed to be either me or her that died. I thought I could outsmart everything. I picked a third option, one that could save both of us. I never stopped to think that my dreams might have already shown me that possibility, too."

"This is why I hate those dreams," Garet said, shaking his head. "All they make you do is second-guess yourself, Ivan. You can't beat yourself up over not knowing what was going to happen, even if you saw pieces of it. In the end, you're just like the rest of us."

Ivan smiled, looking over at the man. "Don't hate them too much. If it wasn't for them, I'd probably have just taken Atropos' offer to save Mia with my own life."

"Yeah, well, that's not a choice you get to make," Garet snapped. "You made the right choice, Ivan: you fight. You keep on fighting until you can't anymore, and then you fight a little longer. If you ever give up like that, I'll follow you to the underworld and kick your ass myself, understand?"

He chuckled, then said, "You don't get it, Garet. I'd be glad to give my life for one of you. For all of you. I can't think of any better way to die."

"I can."

"Old and in bed isn't a reasonable option at the moment."

"No, not that, you gnome. If you have to go, it's not going to be by lying down. You're going to die standing next to me, and Isaac. We don't give up. We fight until the very end."

"And then just a little longer," Ivan added, burying his face into his knees to hide his smile. Standing beside his

friends... "Maybe we should have died in Tolbi with everyone else."

"Don't be so sure part of us didn't."

Ivan looked up, straightening out his legs. *Isaac,* he realized. "How... How is he doing?"

Garet hesitated, frowning. "Bad. He won't talk to anyone. He won't do anything. He's shut everyone out and only talks about things related to stopping them. He's... He's gonna break, Ivan. He hasn't yet, but he can't handle this. Trying to kill his own father was bad enough for him. This? If he doesn't get past this, we'll never see him again." Garet leaned forward and rested his chin in his hands. "You seem to be doing alright, though. Other than being a bit beaten up."

The boy looked down. "I'm trying not to think about it right now. If I can stay focused on the other things, I can pretend it didn't happen...for a while. Maybe I'll be the same as Isaac when that falls apart."

"You won't," Garet said. "That's not you. When life punches you in the gut, you fall down and hold your stomach for a while, but you get back up. You always get back up. That's your strength, Ivan. You don't know how to quit."

Ivan could not help but smile again. "Only you would call that a good thing, Garet." He leaned against the headboard. "I'm not ready to think about it, though. Not yet."

Garet shifted beside him, rustling something on the floor. "Here, have some of this, then."

He held out a large flask that Ivan glanced over and took, peering inside. "What is it?"

"Medicine that Mia put together," Garet said. "She said it dulls the pain and helps you sleep better."

Ivan tilted the flask in his mouth, tasting the concoction. He almost spat it out as it burned his throat on the way down. "This is horrible," he said, his face scrunching up at the aftertaste.

Garet shrugged, looking away. "That's how you know it works, I guess."

"How much of this do I have to drink?"

"You don't have to take it all at once. Just keep drinking it slowly."

Ivan eyed the bottle, then took another small swallow before setting it on his nightstand, his body shivering on its own. "How is Mia doing? What happened with her and Alex?"

Garet rolled his eyes. "She's fine. She tried to downplay everything, but even the details she let out were ridiculous. That book he had? He summoned *Charon* with it."

"...The god?"

"How many parents name their kid Charon?"

Ivan frowned. "You can't fight a god, though."

"She didn't need to," Garet said, crossing his arms. "She destroyed the book and Charon left. Granted, this was after Alex called Clotho's father there to try and kill her, but he refused, and after Mia had stolen that Mercury blade they found from him."

The boy shook his head, reaching for the flask and taking another burning swallow. It burned less than the previous ones, at least, as he got used to it. "He called Dullahan? Didn't he say he'd be forced to pass on if we did that?"

Garet shrugged again. "Dunno, I wasn't there. Regardless, when she started against him, he had both that sword and the book. Two calls for help from Alex later, Mia has one, destroyed the other, and I don't think she's got a scratch on her."

Ivan glanced down at himself. "Wish I could say the same. Could you open the curtains, please?"

Light flooded the room as Garet reached behind him, pulling the drawstring. When he turned back to Ivan, he winced. "Wow. Uh, I mean, you're not that bad."

"Yeah. I'm sure."

Garet fidgeted in his chair, but said nothing.

Ivan had an idea of what the man wanted to say, but he did not feel up to that discussion just yet. Instead, he asked, "What did you find out about Deadbeard?"

"Nothing," Garet said. "Well, I guess that's not true. Remember Kaja? The bald guy on the ship we took across the Karagol? Red beard?"

Memories of the boat swirled around as he closed his eyes, hazy and distant. He could pick out Sean and Ouranos, though he suspected that his recent encounter with the pair helped that. Had they still been in Tolbi? He tried to force the thought aside, images of the Kraken filling it instead.

...Nothing else came to mind, though, except Mia leaning over him in their cabin. He re-opened his eyes and shook his head.

"No? Well, whatever. He was the captain we were meeting with," Garet said. "We had everything pretty much worked out, too, when Isaac figured out Atropos was lying to you, and we booked it back there."

"What tipped him off?" Ivan asked. He had not noticed anything up until Atropos made her move. Had she distracted him from figuring her out with her Psynergy?

"Your dream, actually, of me and her fighting. He pointed out it couldn't have happened yet, like she said it would have, since we don't have the armor yet," Garet said.

Of course. How stupid of him. Atropos might have pushed his mind and helped lower his suspicions, but he had not spent every waking hour near her. How did he miss that detail? He prided himself on his ability to note inconsistencies like that.

After a short consideration, though, he realized it would have made no difference. They had suspected Atropos already, but of the wrong goal. Nothing had hinted at her true target. Ivan tried to imagine what he would have done different, if he knew she had lied to him, but could think of nothing. Of all of them, he would have picked Alex to be the safest around her.

When his attention returned to Garet, he found that hesitant expression on his face again. Ivan sighed. "You want to know what happened, don't you?"

Garet frowned. "Not if you don't want to talk about it, but... Well, Mia wasn't able to tell us a whole lot about Atropos.

She even thought-" He paused, then shook his head. "Never mind, don't worry about it."

Ivan looked down at his lap, one hand folded atop the other. He knew that avoiding difficulties never helped someone overcome them, but he still found himself nervous to think about Tolbi too closely. *Just do it,* he thought. *Just get it over with and deal with it after.* He took another drink of the medicine, trying to run through the events, but the past adrenaline and present disorientation muddled the flow of time. "I need a minute. Everything's still kind of jumbled."

Garet leaned back in his chair. "Start at the beginning. Try and tell me everything you can remember."

He did. The events fell into place as he organized them with his words, although at a few points he jumped backward to add something. He told it in a quiet voice, with none of the emphasis or dramatic phrasing common in stories.

Garet listened in silence, only interrupting to clarify something, his lower face hidden behind his folded hands. When Ivan finished, he sat there in silence still for a long time, watching the boy, who closed his eyes and leaned his head against the headboard.

He felt lightheaded. His fumbled around for a moment for the medicine, his eyelids feeling heavy, but lacking any desire to sleep.

"So let me see if I got this right," Garet said after a minute, leaning forward. "You watched a friend get murdered, knew her killer could do the same to you, went after her anyway, fought your way through a city of people trying to stop you, used Psynergy in a way that one of the oldest Jupiter Adepts in the world hadn't thought of, fought her alone, and

survived." Garet spread his hands to the side. "Where the hell, in any of that, can you possibly blame yourself?"

Ivan refused to open his eyes. He felt warm inside. "I was supposed to stop her," he mumbled.

"Do you think you could have beaten her?"

"No."

"Then what the hell did you fail at?" Garet stood, prompting Ivan to open his eyes. The Valean shook his head, a hand covering his face. "Ivan, kicking yourself for not beating Atropos is like kicking yourself because you couldn't freeze the ocean. *No one* could have done it in your position, alone, without any kind of advantages. The fact that you lived to tell about it is impossible enough. You shouldn't tell yourself you can't do something, but you also need to know what you actually *can't* do, and not let yourself get distracted by things that really are impossible."

Garet stepped across the room to the door, and for a moment, everything turned to the side to Ivan. It settled out again as Garet paused with his hand on the doorknob. "You're really smart, Ivan, but sometimes you're really dumb, too. Make sure to take your medicine. It'll make you feel better."

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Mia sat opposite Isaac, straight-backed, watching him.

He sank into one of the couches, his gaze fixed on Mia's knee. He could not bring himself to look her in the face. Not for long, at least. A fire crackled off to their side, beating away the last remnants of the morning's chill.

She sighed. "Isaac, I'm a healer of the body, not the mind. I don't know how to help you without you showing me the way."

"I don't need help," he said. "I'm fine."

Her knee shifted. "No matter how many times you say that, it doesn't make it true. Isaac, why won't you talk to me?"

"I have nothing to talk about."

"Nothing to talk about?" She uncrossed her legs, placing both feet flat on the floor as she leaned forward. "Talking about things is one of the easiest ways to get past them, I know that much. You can't get any better if you wall yourself up like this."

"I'm fine," he said again.

Mia shook her head. Isaac could see her long hair swaying with the motion. "You're fine. Jenna's fine. Garet's fine. Everyone's fine. That's just fine." The woman took a deep breath. "Okay. What about our plans? What are we doing from here?"

"Felix already set everything up," Isaac said, his gaze unmoving. "He's leaving me, you, Ivan, and Jenna here while the others go to Yallam to get the boat and talk to Sunshine."

"Why doesn't he-"

She fell silent as the door to the small sitting room opened. Isaac shifted his gaze to the fire, away from the door.

"Oh. Hi Isaac."

He turned back at the sound of Ivan's voice, but winced at the boy's appearance. His nose was dark and swollen, the bruise extending across one of his cheeks, as well.

Ivan squinted into the room. "Hi Mia." He stepped through the doorway and began shuffling across the carpet towards them.

Something seemed strange about him, even for someone who had slept for the better part of a day. Mia noticed it as well. "Ivan? What are you doing out of bed?"

"I was bored in there all alone," he mumbled, dropping onto the couch next to Isaac. Something familiar tickled at the young man's nose.

"You still should be resting," Mia said with a frown. "At least until I can make sure your nose is healing properly. I don't think you want me to have to set it again. It's very unpleasant to do when you're conscious."

Ivan let out a low sound, somewhere between a groan and a whine. "But I took all the medicine. I should be fine, right?"

Mia's eyes narrowed. "What medicine?"

"The medicine you gave to Garet."

The woman stared at him for a moment, then stood. She crossed to the opposite couch and leaned down towards the boy's face, then stood up again. "Medicine. Of course. Where is he?"

Ivan shrugged, blinking in slow motion. "I dunno. He just left."

She turned and walked out of the room without a word, slamming the door shut as she left. Isaac and Ivan both stared at the closed door in silence for a moment before the boy turned to him and asked, "What's she mad about?"

With Ivan's face pointed at his own, Isaac finally placed the odd smell.

It was alcohol.

Ivan was drunk.

He stared in disbelief at the boy, whose eyes and eyelids never managed to stay still for long. Ivan had always refused any kind of alcohol, no matter the occasion, much to Garet's annoyance. He said he saw no point in doing that to himself, despite Garet's claims that everyone should try it at least once, that Ivan could never appreciate the experience in either a positive or negative manner if he never felt it himself.

Isaac had always agreed with Garet, at least on the last bit, but he never pushed Ivan on the matter. Now that he no longer needed to step in to shield the boy from Garet, he often stayed out of their disagreements and let them run their course. They fought only on rare occasions, unlike Garet and Felix, and always resolved those arguments within a day.

A weight dropped onto his shoulder. Isaac glanced down to find Ivan's head on it, his smooth, blond hair bunched up and pushed in all directions. "Don't touch my nose," the boy said. "It hurts a lot."

Isaac rolled his shoulder to swing his arm around Ivan's back and pull him into a more comfortable position on his chest.

As Isaac leaned onto the armrest, the younger boy pulled his feet up onto the couch and curled them to his body.

He closed his eyes and his breathing slowed, but after a minute, he spoke. "You're comfy."

The Valean looked down at him. "What?"

"I said you're comfy." Ivan wiggled once, fixing whatever issue he had with his position. "And nice. You're nice and comfy." The boy giggled softly.

"I'm not nice," Isaac murmured, more to himself, looking towards the fire.

"Course you are," Ivan said. "You were always really nice to me. Garet wasn't at first. He was kinda mean. Not you, though. You're always nice."

"What makes you think I'm nice?"

Ivan giggled again, turning his head to look up at Isaac. "'Cause you've got blond hair."

Isaac wondered how drunk the boy was, but his curiosity won out. "What do you mean?"

His eyelids wavered for a moment, but he kept them open. "You've got blond hair. That means you're nice. It means you're different. Like me." His eyes closed and he fell silent again. Isaac thought he had fallen asleep again, but he continued after a few seconds. "Felix scares me. I don't like brown-haired people. Everyone in Kalay has brown hair."

"You... A lot of them didn't like you, did they?" Isaac asked.

Ivan turned his head forward again, not answering at first. Even through all that alcohol, he still held it close to himself, Isaac realized. "No," Ivan murmured. "I was weird. I was strange. I used to talk to cats. Cats always like you if you feed them. They aren't mean."

Isaac pulled the boy a little tighter to him. "And...I was different?"

"You were weird too." He giggled again. "You had the same hair and strange powers too. Some people didn't mind my Psynergy, but they weren't friends. You were. You liked me. I could be weird with you and you liked it. And I liked you. That's why I came back. I wanted to be with you."

"A lot of people did," Isaac said. "Look at all the good I did for them."

Ivan sighed. "I know. That's why you're nice."

Isaac opened his mouth to correct him, but closed it after a moment. There was no point; he doubted Ivan would remember any of the conversation. No one got anywhere arguing with a drunk, anyway.

This drunk wanted to argue, though. "I know you don't think so all the time. You've had to do some not-nice things before, but that's okay. Everyone does bad things sometimes. But you do them because you're nice. Doesn't that make them not-bad?"

"I don't think it works that way," Isaac said, straightening Ivan's clumped hair with his fingers.

"Course it does," Ivan said. He twisted, trying to turn to look up at Isaac again, but abandoned the idea after a single

failed attempt. "You're always trying to help people. You're a hero."

Isaac closed his eyes, leaning his head back. "I'm no hero."

Ivan said nothing for a moment. "Well, you're my hero," he murmured.

The tears rolled down his cheeks, but he kept himself still and silent, not wanting to disturb Ivan. The warmth of the room had grown throughout the morning and Isaac felt his eyes drifting shut. With nothing more pressing calling him, he dropped his head into a more comfortable position and let sleep carry him off.

A scuffle on the floor woke him some time later. He blinked through his blurry vision to find Sheba sitting down in front of the fireplace, her knees pulled to her chest. Had she seen him? Probably not; he had slipped down on the couch, both he and Ivan now lying along it, and it faced away from the door.

He closed his eyes again. He saw no reason to bother her.

A sharp sniff made him open them again. Sheba had most of her face buried into her knees, her eyes just high enough to stare over them at the dancing flames. For a long, silent moment, Isaac began to wonder if he had heard the crackle of something in the fire when it came again, this time clearly from the girl.

He hesitated. She had come in here to be alone, he knew, and wanted to respect that. Or was that what he wanted to tell himself?

The sides argued in his head for a long moment before reaching a decision. "Sheba?" he called out.

The girl did not jump, as often happened when surprised with a noise in an otherwise quiet room. She glanced beneath her armpit, met his gaze for a moment, then turned back to the fire. "Hey. Sorry, I'll be quiet."

He considered accepting her answer and letting sleep take him again. He had never known her to sound like this, though, not unless something bothered her. The question, 'Are you okay?' came to his lips, but he bit down on it. He knew how stupid such a question was.

Instead, he gently pushed Ivan aside as he slipped out from beneath the boy, who wiggled at the movement, snuggling in closer to the cushion. Isaac watched him for a moment, then turned and walked towards the fire, sitting beside Sheba.

Her gaze lingered on Ivan. "Mia let him out?"

Despite everything, a small, wry smile pulled on Isaac's lips. "Garet got him drunk."

Sheba snorted, but her amusement made it no further. Her mouth reburied itself into the depths of her knees, the flickering flames reflected in her eyes.

He wanted to say something. He knew she hurt, but could think of nothing that might make her feel better. "I'm sorry about Aisa," he decided on.

It took a few seconds for Sheba to respond, her head slowly revolving to look at him. "Isaac..." She shook her head and returned her gaze to the fire. "I don't get you sometimes."

"I don't expect people to."

"No, I mean, all of this that's happened, and you're apologizing about one person that died?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I know she was a friend of yours. Her death is partially my fault."

Sheba made some kind of sound between a grunt and a growl. "That wasn't your fault."

"If I'd realized Atropos was lying, then I could-"

"Then she would have probably killed you when she found out you didn't have the other piece of the Sun, then."

Isaac hummed softly. "To think, Alex had it wrong the entire time. Everything that he's done, wasted."

"Do you know what happened to it?" Sheba asked.

"No idea," Isaac said. "Maybe it's just gone. That would make things so much simpler, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe," Sheba muttered. "Isaac..." She paused. Almost a minute passed in silence as he waited for her to continue. "What did you have to do so...so you could fight your father?"

His stomach tightened as he stared into the flames, watching them rip into the wood splinter by splinter. "Nothing. I just did what I had to do."

"That's not helpful," she said.

Isaac sighed. "I don't know what to tell you. It wasn't something I thought about at the time. It's also not something I've liked thinking about since."

Sheba said nothing.

He chanced a glance at her, finding her lower face once again buried into her knees, her eyes locked on the flames. Or rather, in the flames' direction. He doubted she saw them anymore.

In a way, Isaac knew she had it worse than him. Since his father would have been an innocent life lost in the name of a greater good, it made the action itself difficult, but the memory of the man grew brighter for it. Sheba could fight her father with ease, after all the horrors he had contributed to, but she would live with the memory of what he was for the rest of her life.

Maybe he owed it to her to try and help her deal with that.

He closed his eyes, bringing himself back to that stormy aerie. Back to the moment he realized the truth. Was it staring into the dragon's eyes, and seeing his own? Had it been during the fight itself? He could not be sure, not entirely. The adrenaline had blended much of that night together. What had let him continue swinging his sword? Why had he not stopped?

His father had died already. For years, he believed that. It hurt, both him and his mother, but in time, they'd come to accept it. Felix had first told him otherwise, of course, but even at the end, when he figured it out, when he raised his sword that last time on their journey... Could he raise it simply because he had already come to terms with the consequences?

No... He had no doubt that Sheba would take no issue with Lachesis' death, should another cause it. If that was the only reason he could do it, then he could not help Sheba. Some other reason had to exist, something that he had buried in his memories.

Had knowing that he fought for the good of Weyard empowered him? He had tried to believe that, he really had. He wanted to say the weight of all those souls on his shoulders had guided his decisions, had given him strength when he had none of his own. It had never been true, though, not since meeting with Felix. The thought did little more than make him second-guess himself, wondering if he had made some horrible mistake that would doom them all.

Telling Sheba the world would thank her for it would do nothing, though. She already knew him as a monster.

Isaac dove deeper. What had driven him? He closed his eyes, picturing not a dragon in front of the aerie, but his father. The man stood with his arms open and eyes closed, simultaneously blocking Isaac's path and leaving himself open to attack.

Stepping forward in his mind, Isaac tried to think. What would let him strike down his own father like that, when he removed everything else? He stepped forward once more, closing even his mind's eye. In the darkness, his mother looked away, burying her face.

That was it, of course, he realized, opening his real eyes.

Sheba had not moved.

"It was my mother," Isaac said. Sheba glanced over at him. "I knew I had to do it for her. If I didn't, she would get my dad back instead of me, but they'd both die anyway. He would have died either way. I would have killed him to save her."

"How, though?" Sheba whispered. "How could you bring yourself to do that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. By ignoring everything else, I guess. I don't think I even thought about anything else. It was, 'I have to do this to save mom.' The world, who the dragon was... Those didn't matter anymore. She did."

Sheba said nothing. She rested her the side of her head on her knees, staring off into the dark corner of the room. The fire had grown low, neither of them moving to stoke or feed it. A gentle snoring started up behind Isaac, causing Sheba to glance back and smile. "He's such a dweeb. I wish I had been here when he was awake."

Isaac fixed his gaze on the fire again. Sheba was probably one of the few who could get away with calling him that, one of the few Ivan viewed as an equal. Her, Jenna, and Garet. The other Jupiter and Mars Adepts of their little group. Strange how that worked out.

"You know what my brother told Felix when I left with him, right after the first attack?" Sheba asked. "He blocked our door and told Felix he'd kill him before letting him take me."

Isaac's eyebrows rose. He had only met the boy once, but he had not struck him as the sort of child to say such a thing.

"He was the only one of my family who didn't have a problem with Felix." She chuckled. "Actually, they got along great. Javen loved him. Thought he was one of the coolest people ever. But he stood up to him for me. To protect me." Her eyes closed. "I think... I think I would kill the whole world for him."

The words chilled Isaac. He hoped nothing would ever test them.

The eyes opened again after a minute. "You don't have any siblings, do you?"

"No," he said, then glanced over his shoulder at the sleeping boy. "Or maybe I do, and it's just taken me a while to notice." Would he kill the world for Ivan?

Get away from him, you bitch!

One city down. Plenty more left to find out.

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"What do you mean, you can't do it?" Felix asked.

Sunshine shook his head. "Just that. I... It seems like it could work, but I'm not good enough to pull it off."

Felix frowned and turned away, crossing his arms over his chest. Piers knew it as a sign of restraint, that he was holding his frustration in and letting it settle, so he picked up in his place. "Sunshine, I've met a lot of smiths. There is no mortal more skilled in the manipulation of elementally charged metal. If it can be done, you're the one who can do it."

"No, you don't understand," the smith said, running his hand through his hair. "I usually work with raw materials, not finished products. I have room to experiment and figure things out. I don't have that here. I doubt my forge can even handle that thing," he added, gesturing to the Mars blade in Piers' hands. "It's on fire, for the gods' sakes."

"Sunny," his wife called out in a warning tone.

He winced and rubbed his hands together. "Look, I'm sorry. I was a bit excited when I brought it up. Haven't you ever been passionate about something, and had a really great idea, only to learn it wasn't quite doable? That's what this is."

Piers frowned. He knew that feeling all too well. "What about the Myrtle armor?"

Sunshine spun around. "Ah, that *was* doable." He moved back into his smithing area and dragged out a wooden crate. He pushed it over to the duo and pulled the sheet from atop it, sending a few papers to the floor. He ignored them, bending down to lift the armor from the crate. "It came out great, I think. I can't say how useful it will actually be, but if it does what you say it does, then this here will be the finest suit of armor you could ever wear." He paused. "Just, uh, watch out for lava."

Piers stepped towards the table and peered down at the armor. He ran his hand over the metal and rapped his fingers upon it, his mind swearing that he would hear the dull thunk of rock. This jade was no stone, however, the clean, metallic ring echoing in the small house.

Sunshine placed the pieces back in the crate. "I hope this'll be enough for you."

Piers placed a bag of gold on the table. "It's more than we had a moment ago. Thank you again, Sunshine. We will certainly be back." He grabbed the crate of armor and followed Felix out the door.

The other man waited five steps before saying, "We can't let him give up that easily."

"I have no intention of letting him do so," Piers said. "But there's no use standing here and pushing him on it like this. Let's get back to the others and talk it out. At the very least, we'll still have the individual swords and this armor. Those will still help significantly."

Felix grunted, but offered no further argument. Piers knew Sunshine's denial still annoyed the man, but he would calm down in time.

A change in topic might help him along. "The repairs on the *Kailani* are to be finished today."

"Really? That fast?"

Piers nodded. "Yallam carpenters do swift work, oddly enough, for how little work they see. We should be able to take her when we leave. If we fly the entire way, we should return within two days."

Felix frowned. "That's two days we're still blind, though. We have no way of knowing what the Anemoi are doing while we're out here."

"Well... If we feel it necessary, I can bring the ship to Kalay on a skeleton crew of two," Piers said. "We can make it in roughly the same time."

"We might not need to go that low," Felix said. "I'd just rather not keep Sheba here any longer than necessary. We don't know how much Clotho told the others before his death."

They entered the inn in silence, heading upstairs to their rooms. Once inside, Piers placed the crate down, then dropped into a wooden chair, mopping at his forehead with his sleeve.

"Is that the armor?" Garet asked.

Felix nodded. "It is, and it's set to go." He paused. "Where is everyone?"

Piers glanced around the room and found it much less crowded than when they had left; only Garet and Buford had occupied it upon their return.

"Master Ashling took the others to check on the ship," the warrior said, half-seated on the end of a bedframe.

The Lemurian frowned. He could see Hama wanting to check on the progress herself, but... "Why did Sheba and Brennan go with her?"

Garet shrugged. "Sheba...needed a walk. Brennan did too. I don't think he's really dealt with what happened yet."

"You have?" Piers asked.

Their eyes locked for a moment. "Enough to do what I need to," Garet said.

Piers shifted his gaze to Buford. "And you? How are you feeling?"

"I..." Buford shook his head. "My mourning can come later."

Felix nodded. "Good, but I have some bad news. We have a problem with the sword. Sunshine doesn't feel he's capable of making it."

Garet frowned. "So we wasted all that time trying to find those swords?"

"We don't know yet," Felix said. "I don't think this conversation with Sunshine is over just yet."

"Why?" Buford asked. "Do you believe you can convince him that he *can* make it?"

Before Felix could answer, Piers said, "Actually, Sunshine might very well be right. He might not be capable of making this sword."

Garet frowned. "Then we just give up on it?"

"Did he say that?" Felix asked, giving Garet a flat look.

Piers resisted the urge to smile at Felix's small outburst, turning away from the others to hide it. He stepped around the room towards the window, placing his hands on the sill as he looked out across Yallam. "Sunshine brought up a few good points. This isn't the kind of work he's used to. Making that Mars blade, that's something he likely would have been able to do, though in a different manner, I'd wager."

"Do you think Ein could forge it?" Felix asked.

"I don't know." The Lemurian turned around and leaned against the window, folding his arms. "I don't believe Einion has dealt with anything like this before, either. His skill lies primarily with metalworking. I have no doubt he could combine these blades, but ensuring their properties remained would be another matter entirely." He paused. "However...if Sunshine combined his Psynergetic enhancement with Einion's ability to work steel, I imagine the two of them could do it."

Garet frowned. "Einion's that smith in Prox, right? You want to bring him here?"

Piers shook his head. "No. Sunshine also expressed concern about his forge, questioning its ability to handle the work. I have no skill in judging that, but if he is unsure of it, I trust his judgment. I don't know of any way to compare forges, if Einion's might be more powerful, but I don't need to. I

already know of a suitable forge for this job. If it can't be done there, it can't be done anywhere."

"You're talking about the forge in Champa," Felix said quietly. "The one used by Briggs' grandmother."

"Obaba, yes," Piers said. "While far from a traditional smith, she holds many lost secrets of forging that I expect to help. She is the woman who joined the pieces of the Trident together," he added, looking at Garet. "It's possible she may be able to make our sword herself, but at this point, I have no desire to risk that. I plan to bring all three smiths together in Champa for the forging of this blade."

None of them replied for a long moment. Felix frowned, looking at his feet, reviewing what had just been said and trying to find holes or weaknesses in the plan. Buford watched Felix; Piers knew the two had worked as mercenaries together once, and he suspected Buford had learned of Felix's mind for planning. The man had little in the way of input, at any rate, having learned of their plans just that morning.

Only Garet replied. He shook his head before leaning forward and cradling it in his hands. "Piers, you are completely ridiculous."

"Ridiculous?"

The Valean looked up. "This is probably the most farfetched scheme I've ever seen anyone come up with." He snorted. "Let the Anemoi dream this up. They'll spend weeks trying to make sense of it." Felix glared at him, but before he could say anything, Garet continued. "Do you have any plans to convince Sunshine and Einion to agree to this?"

"Ein won't take much," Felix said after a moment, his disapproving gaze still locked on Garet. "He's a man of Prox, through and through, and the Anemoi will go after them eventually. He'll do what he needs to do to defend his town. Sunshine, though..."

Garet snorted. "He can be a real pain in the ass sometimes."

Felix's frown deepened, but he nodded. "He's well known for his stubbornness when unmotivated."

"I doubt he'll be a problem," Piers said. "Don't you remember what he looked like when he said he couldn't make the sword? I've never seen a man so disappointed with himself before. He would love to do it, but he believes it impossible. If I can convince him that, with help, it is, I expect he will willingly join this team."

"Looks like I'm headed to Prox, then," Felix said.

"What about the rest of us?" Buford asked.

"You'll be taking the armor to Kalay on the ship," Felix said, gesturing to the crate. "You and Brennan are both inexperienced Adepts, but I don't think you'll have much trouble helping to fly it, at least for short periods."

"With that many people on the *Kailani,* there's no reason for you to go alone," Piers said. "I'll come with you. It's not good for any of us to be alone right now."

"Are they gonna be okay with you having that?" Garet said, pointing to the sword on Felix's back.

"They might respect Isaac, but they don't like him," Felix said, shifting the golden blade with a shrug of his shoulders.

"They'll probably be happier to see it in my hands instead of his."

"I bet he's happier to see it there, too," Garet muttered, looking away. "We should just throw it in the ocean."

"Perhaps we will, when this is all over," Piers said. "But that's not our choice to make. We swore that we would return it to them when our use of it had finished."

Garet waved a hand towards the window. "Isn't it? Do you really plan on using it again, knowing what it does?"

Felix said nothing for a long moment. "If it's the only way I see to defeat the kings, then yes. If we don't stop them, they will destroy far more than a single city."

The room fell silent. A bird cawed outside the window a few times, then flew past it. A song drifted up through the open doorway from downstairs; the innkeeper's wife singing to herself as she cleaned.

"You..." Garet breathed.

"I think I could use that walk now," Buford said, standing. His face had gone pale.

"I'll join you," Piers said, giving the man a small smile as he followed him from the room.

Buford glanced at the door as Piers shut it. "Are you sure it's alright to leave them there?"

Piers shook his head. "They'll be fine. They get into this every so often." As they moved downstairs and passed Dorothy, bustling near the front desk, Piers called out, "If

you hear shouting upstairs, don't worry. It's best just to leave them."

The woman looked at him, confused, but the Lemurian continued past, emerging into the evening's fading light. He and Buford walked in silence through the town, the former only giving guidance when their path would lead them out of it. Yallam held little in the way of dangerous wildlife, but Piers preferred not to press their luck; it only took a few seconds of distraction at night for everything to go wrong.

"Did he mean it?" Buford asked as they gazed up a small hill at a house. "About using that sword again?"

"No," Piers said. "He is relentless and ruthless to the guilty, but Felix always avoids involving innocents. If any of our number could do so, I would have named Isaac as the most likely. But...I doubt even he could do that. He would sacrifice anything of his own to stop them, but he can't make that kind of choice. Not intentionally, and not live with it."

Buford nodded. "That is...good to hear. I... Tolbi was..." He paused to collect his thoughts. "No one else needs to experience what we did there."

Piers glanced over at him for a second. "Did you live there?"

"Yes. My brother and I each did, all our lives," he said. "We did a bit of traveling around Angara and Gondowan as we grew, but Tolbi was always the city we called home."

The softness of Buford's voice made the question that came to Piers' mind unnecessary. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..." He trailed off.

Buford shook his head as they walked. "It's fine. I was able to grieve a bit before, and I'll be able to do so more once we're

finished. His is not the first loss I've suffered."

"Would you tell me about him?" Piers asked.

Silence fell between them for a moment, and Piers began to wonder if the man had taken offense to the question. Lemurians rarely spoke of the dead, but Piers had noticed other cultures often honored them with tales, not just Prox. Had he misjudged?

The hesitation appeared to be nothing more than time for Buford to organize his thoughts, however. "He was a judge, appointed by Lord Babi himself. He'd always held such a high opinion of justice. I wanted to follow him, but I have no mind for that line of work."

"So you became a mercenary, instead?"

Buford nodded. "I sought the position of a palace guard, the highest honor a fighter can achieve in Tolbi. Every one of their members is selected from Colosso victors."

"Yes, I remember Felix mentioning that," Piers said. "It was one reason why he refused to compete. He felt it would be unfair to enter with no intention of taking the job should he win. Your brother liked his work?"

"Loved it. He always told me he could think of no more noble way to spend his life than in the service of justice."

Piers turned his face up to the afternoon sky. "Then let us administer the piece of justice that he could not."

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"It feels weird to be leaving without Piers again," Sheba said.

Garet made a small noise of agreement. "It's not like anything bad happened the last time we took the ship and he went to Prox, either."

The two of them stood on the bow of the *Kailani,* watching the waves pass below them as the sun set ahead of them. Sheba had always liked watching the sea when the sun grew low, as blue gave way to red and orange and yellow, a sea of flames that danced and sparkled until twilight settled in.

Now, however, the image of flames made her queasy. She lifted her eyes from the water and turned around, leaning against the railing and gazing at the cabins. Hama and Buford had gone to sleep in preparation for their night shifts. Brennan had seated himself at the table, tinkering with his version of the Anemian communication tool. Sheba had taken to thinking of them as Talking Tines.

"Hey," Garet said, causing her to look over. He still leaned over the railing, looking down at the water. "Thanks. For helping with Isaac. I... I don't know what you did, but he's doing a lot better."

Sheba shook her head. "I didn't do anything except ask him for help. He might be my friend, but your his best friend. I'm sure you would have figured something out."

Garet sighed. "I couldn't, though. I tried. He just shut down and wouldn't respond with anything more than a single word. I mean, I'm not great with words and people and stuff," he snorted, smiling for a moment. When it passed, he frowned again. "It's more than that, though. Most of my problems with people are, well, caused by me. At least somewhat. I haven't... This wasn't. I didn't know what to do. Nothing was working. I was worried I would never get him back."

He glanced over at Sheba, then back at the horizon. "He's my best friend. I should know him better than that. He should be able to count on me better than that. But I couldn't do a damn thing. Do you know how that feels?"

Flashes of cinnamon passed through Sheba's mind. The girl dropped her eyes to the deck. "Yeah. I do." She saw Garet's head turn back to her. "I... Jenna wasn't dealing with it very well, either." She paused. "That's...a pretty big understatement, actually. She was only a step above Isaac."

Garet grunted and looked away. "Yeah... I don't really know how to talk to Jenna about something like this. Isaac's usually the one who calms her down when people die. I usually have to go hit something before I'm ready to help anyone else." The leather of his gloves crackled as he squeezed the rail. "This kind of crap... I don't get sad about it, like her. I just get mad. Really mad. I usually can't even talk to anyone until I've vented."

Sheba frowned. "How much venting did it take you to get over this?"

"I haven't yet."

She looked up at him.

"I'm saving it," he said. "Every time I want to hit something in frustration, I push the feeling back down. There's only one thing I can vent on in order to feel better about this, and I haven't see her yet. Soon, though," he added quietly. "Soon."

Both fell silent. Should she let Garet stew and suppress his feelings like that? Mia or Hama would know better than her, but Sheba doubted it. Could she say anything to change his mind, though?

Furthermore, did she *want* to change his mind? She remembered speaking to Alex, in Tolbi, what seemed like months ago. Had he not pointed out that emotions, when released in a controlled and directed fashion, could prove incredibly potent and useful?

She had never seen Garet fight while angry, Sheba realized. She had seen Felix, a thought that struck her as very odd, given his and Garet's frequent arguments. It made sense in her head for Garet to get angry while fighting, but she could not recall it. Had the others seen it? Could Isaac say he had? She tried to imagine how it would look, banishing the thought a moment later; it scared her.

The door to the cabin banged open. Sheba's eyes snapped to it, but Brennan emerged with no apparent haste or distress. He glanced around the deck and moved towards them. "This is it! I think I have it working!"

Sheba looked at the thing he held in his hands, but she did not recognize the device. It looked like a long, metal tube with one end open, and it stood almost as tall as her. "Uh... What is it?"

Brennan frowned, glancing between the two of them again. Had he forgotten neither of them were alchemists? "You remember the Anemian staff you brought back? The one capable of extending the range of Psynergy?"

Garet nodded. "You were trying to copy it, right?"

"Did, actually," the young alchemist said. "Reverse-engineering it was a simple matter, so we decided to apply the same principles elsewhere. Our first thought was to reproduce it, but on a larger scale. Something capable of sending Psynergy not just across a field, but across a continent, or even the world."

"You're talking about how Anemos attacked Tolbi and everyone else," Sheba said.

"Yes. We didn't understand how they had done it until you brought this staff to us, but once we learned how it might be possible, we tried creating our own version." He tapped the tube next to him. "I was able to salvage this prototype from the lab, even though it didn't work, but I think your cannon helped me fill in the missing pieces."

Sheba's eyes flickered up to the Lohoan cannon fitted onto the upper deck. She had forgotten the thing even existed, so rarely did they have a need for it.

"So...it works, I guess?" Garet asked.

Brennan nodded. "I believe so. I haven't been able to test it long range, or with any suitable input, since my Psynergy is... Well, not that significant, so..."

Garet rolled his eyes. "Yeah, sure, I'll test it for you."

Sheba watched the man's face light up with glee as he turned a few knobs on the Tolbian cannon, before handing it off to Garet. "Is it...safe to use on the boat?"

"Oh, of course," he said. "Recoil was among the first issues we addressed. We knew that if the Anemoi could utilize the power of the beacon and channel that through theirs, it obviously lacked any recoil. We sought to recreate theirs as much as possible."

Garet looked over the cannon. "So, how do I use it? Just point and blast?"

Brennan shook his head. "No, no need. It's a two-path process. It collects your Psynergy, along with its intended

form, converting it back into its pure state for transference. It also collects your intended strike point, which we modeled after that jewel you've used for teleportation."

Sheba's eyes widened. She had not thought something like that would be possible. "You put this thing together in just a week? You guys are amazing."

He smiled at her before turning his head to the side. "Yes, my coworkers were some of the brightest minds Weyard could offer."

Were. A cold knot formed in the girl's stomach at the unspoken implications. She had forgotten how they had pulled Brennan from the wreckage of Kraden's palace, along with a lucky pair of servants. Even at that distance from the rock's impact, the wave of force had destroyed the building.

"Then we'll make sure the Anemoi learn just what those 'worms' were capable of," Garet said in a flat voice. He placed both hands on the sides of the cannon, Psynergy pulsing from him.

It felt odd to Sheba. Each pulse bent towards the cannon, an invisible flow of Psynergy from Garet to the weapon. He closed his eyes after a few seconds.

The pulses stopped.

A burst of Psynergy, invisible to the eye, but a beacon to the mind, shot from the cannon straight into the air. Garet stepped back, his eyes tracking it despite having nothing to track, as it rose into the air, curving over and away from the *Kailani.*

Sheba could feel it rising through the air and when it reached the peak of its arc, the Psynergy took form. Light

filled the sky once more as flames winked into existence above their heads. The tiny flames shrieked down towards the water some distance out, striking the surface with plumes of steam one after the other.

Brennan let out a slow sigh. "It works," he murmured, closing his eyes.

"I don't know what we'll use it for, though," Garet admitted. "We're not fighting the entire city, only a couple specific people."

"We'll think of something," Sheba said, shooting Garet a look. As Brennan picked the cannon up and began walking towards the cabin, she said, "Brennan... When this is over... That will need to be destroyed."

The man opened his mouth, indignation lighting up his face in an instant, but he paused. After a moment, he nodded. "Yes. Yes, I... That's probably best." He turned around again. "I want to check it over for damage, see if I can find anything I want to fix or improve."

They watched him go without any further word. Would destroying that cannon keep it out of people's hands, though? Brennan's team had built it in such a short period of time; others would figure out the trick, too. Were there ways to block it, maybe? She'd have to bring that up with him later.

"I talked to Morta," Garet said after a few minutes.

Sheba hesitated before speaking. "Did you tell her about...her sister?"

He nodded. "She told me Atropos showed back up, looking for Lachesis, but he wasn't there. When she asked where

Aisa was, Atropos said she didn't know."

"Did she say anything to her?"

"No," Garet said. "She was smart enough to keep her mouth shut and wait. But... I don't know what happened after I told her."

Sheba glanced over. "What did she say?"

Garet sighed, squeezing the railing again. "Nothing. The link went out after a few seconds."

That could have meant any number of things, but Sheba disliked all of them. What outcomes would she have liked, though? Hearing the news of Aisa's death had stunned her, the nature of it even more. Aisa had helped her. She had been one of Sheba's few friends in Anemos, one of the few she could count on for help, someone who wanted to stop the kings as much as she did, but lacked the ability.

In the end, she had stood up to them regardless, and the king struck her down for her defiance.

"She died a true king," Sheba murmured, more to the breeze than to Garet. "Aisa, I promise you, I won't let them win." How many people did that promise now envelop? How many counted on her to make good on it? *Everyone,* she thought. *Aisa is just one more. The last one.*

When she pulled herself out of her thoughts, she found Garet watching her. "What?"

He looked back towards the sun. "We need to finish this soon. The longer it goes on, the more people are gonna get hurt." He tapped his fingers on the rail. "Ivan gave me a lot of information about Atropos. How she acts, how she thinks,

how she fights. I've got a pretty clear picture in my mind of her."

Sheba said nothing. He seemed to be making a decision himself.

"She's alone in Anemos right now," he continued after a moment. "I don't know if Lachesis is hiding from her, or off doing his own thing, or what, but it doesn't matter. They're separated, and that's what we need." He turned to her. "I have the armor."

The girl glanced towards the cabin. When she spoke, she lowered her voice. "You want to fight her now?"

"No," he said. "I want to kill her now."

Sheba opened and closed her mouth once, thinking. "You can't do it alone, Garet."

He turned to her. "I'm not bragging here. She uses a lot of Psynergy, and the Golden Sun will be useless to her against me. If she does have some actual fighting ability, which I'm sure she does, it'll be just as rusty as Clotho's is. She's arrogant, Sheba, and the Golden Sun will only make her more so. This is our chance. With her out of the way, we don't need to worry about running into multiple kings anymore. There'll just be Lachesis. That's it. This is the best chance we have."

It made sense. Garet always claimed that he hated planning, but none could strategize for individual combat like he could. He knew how to give himself all the advantages, and how to remove all his disadvantages. Even Felix deferred to him a lot in that area. Wasn't that why he had given him the armor in the first place?

"What about the others?" Sheba asked. "Shouldn't we tell them? Shouldn't they be there?"

Garet shook his head. "There's no time. We don't know how long Lachesis will be gone, and bringing anyone else is a bad idea. Atropos can't turn the Golden Sun on me, but she holds complete command over three elements. She'll tear apart anyone without the armor."

Sheba crossed her arms, tucking her chin into her chest. "I'd have to take you, I guess, and then...what, hide?"

He shrugged. "I guess. You can't be at the fight itself, no. If Atropos is willing to kill Lachesis, I'm sure she'd have no problem killing you, too."

"Yeah..." The girl disliked the idea of hiding, but she had no counter to Garet's point. Atropos would kill her just as swiftly as any of the others. She glanced at the cabin again. Buford and Brennan had little experience with Psynergy, and flying would drain them far faster than it would Hama, but between the two of them, she expected Hama could rest enough to maintain their speed. "We should still tell them."

Garet hesitated, then shook his head again. "I don't know Hama enough to figure out what she'll think about this, but I don't want to risk her trying to stop us."

"She might just want to come with us, as backup," Sheba said, then frowned. "But then the ship would take even longer to get to Kalay. If we do this, we can't do it at the cost of other things, or Felix will kill you."

"Felix is going to kill me anyway," he said, raising an eyebrow at her. "I'm bringing you to Anemos so I can fight a king alone. Hell, he'd kill me just for the first part."

Sheba looked away, feeling her face turn pink. "Um, I guess that's true."

A large hand dropped onto her head and ruffled her hair. The girl squirmed and ducked out of range, raising her hands to slap Garet away if he followed. "Ugh, cut it out!"

He laughed, placing his hands on his hips. "I can't help it. You're so cute when you get embarrassed. You're just like Ivan."

Sheba opened her mouth, but closed it again as 'shut up' came to her lips, swallowing the comment and smirking instead. "Aw, I'll be sure to let him know you think he's cute."

"Please do," Garet said with a shrug. "I can't be the only one telling him he looks like a little girl, especially when he goes without cutting his hair for a while."

"I'll pass it along," she said, rolling her eyes. The last piece of the sun dropped below the horizon, the endless yellow interrupted for a single moment by green. Sheba stared at the point for a few moments in silence. Yellow and green... "Are you ready?"

Garet nodded. "Let me grab my stuff."

Sheba watched him head vanish into the cabin, then turned to the twilit sea. She had always planned on going back to Anemos, but when she imagined it, she stood next to Felix, with everyone beside them, heading to end the kings' reign and allow the Anemoi to rejoin Weyard as equals. Sneaking away like this, to rush into the city and assassinate one of those kings... It felt a bit wrong. That wasn't the way heroes were supposed to do it.

When she thought of Tolbi, of Kraden, of Aisa, though, it felt a bit right, too.

To keep Javen out of those thoughts, anything would feel right.

Chapter 21: Checkmate

Golden Sun: Wings of Anemos

Chapter 21 – Checkmate

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"Hold on, Sheba! Take my hand!"

Felix stood at the aerie's edge, caught between the light of the beacon and the light of the setting sun. Not even his dark hair could resist the combined allure, glittering gold in the wind. One hand rested on the pommel of his sword, undrawn. He held the other in front of him, reaching out over the endless drop below.

"I can't..."

A chasm stood between him and Sheba, facing him from another aerie. Unnatural lavender light wrapped around her, a mantle across her shoulders. There were people behind her, masked by the light, save for a single hand around her wrist. She held the other in front of her, reaching out over the sea of clouds beneath them.

"If you don't, you'll fall!"

Felix stepped back, unbuckling his sword belt. The blade clattered against the stone, his cape covering it a moment later. Three steps echoed in the silent air as he ran for the edge, leaping from it into the winds. They roared through the gap beneath him like a river, spilling up on the banks of the two aeries.

"I can't hold on any longer..."

Sheba bowed her head as he jumped. Her hand trembled, then fell to her side. Birds lined the edges of the aerie, watching the man try to fly, hope to fly, fail to fly. Sheba closed her eyes as another hand seized her other wrist, drawing her back, closer to the light. The radiance around her outshone the sun.

"Don't let go! You can't!"

The gold faded from his hair, the combination of purple and brown staining it black instead. His arc ended; his momentum faltered. His hand reached out and caught only air as he fell. He vanished into the gray clouds below, the currents sweeping them along.

"Goodbye, Felix, and thank you."

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Ein stared across his counter at Sunshine, his arms crossed. Fragmented and twisted pieces of metal that once covered the space between them, like corpses on a battlefield, had been swept to the side. Four sheathed swords lay between the two smiths instead.

Felix had expected Sunshine to retreat from the man; Ein could be quite intimidating when he chose.

What Sunshine lacked in presence, however, he made up for in sheer stubbornness. The younger smith stood in a similar pose, his jaw set and eyes locked. Ein had initially been dismissive of the man, only relenting into silent observation when Felix vouched for the quality of his work. Felix had learned to judge weapons from Ein; the Proxian must have felt his lessons had taken hold.

"So," Ein said. "This blade is tougher than you thought." He reached out and grabbed one sword, pulling it free of the sheath as flames danced along the steel's edge. He glanced back at his forge for a moment. "Good call to do it elsewhere. Forge can't handle this. Not here, not at the lighthouse."

Felix nodded. "I've seen the forge in Champa. You won't be displeased with it."

Ein grunted. "You keep telling me that." His eyes flickered to Sunshine, who returned the gaze with as fierce a glare as the man could muster - which, Felix had to admit, ranked only slightly more fearsome than a child's. "Better be right if you want my help."

"Will you be ready to leave in the morning?" Felix asked.

The only answer came as a flat stare, interrupted by a different voice.

"Wait, you're leaving?"

Felix glanced around Ein to find the man's apprentices, Liam and Terandi, poking their heads around the corner from the back room. "Thought I told you to stay in the back."

"We are in the back," Terandi pointed out. "You never told us not to listen."

Ein stepped to the side, looking over one of his workbenches. He selected a rough looking sword from one, picked up a hammer with the other hand, then laid the sword flat, the blade protruding from the bench's edge.

Liam must have known what was to come, calling out, "Wait!"

The hammer fell, snapping off the top foot or so of the sword. Ein collected both pieces and dropped each in one boy's hands. "Your project for while I'm gone. If people bring in stuff, work on that instead. Don't get ambitious. Go home. Get some sleep."

The boys mumbled an affirmative as they walked past, not meeting the eyes of anyone else.

"Thank you for this, Ein," Felix said. "I know how difficult it is for you to leave Prox, even for a short time."

The smith grunted again. "If I died tonight, they'd do fine. They don't need instruction anymore, just practice. Tiamat's got different plans for me." He waved one thick hand as he turned, heading towards the back of his shop. "I'll be ready in an hour."

"Do you need any help?" Piers asked.

"Didn't ask for any, did I?" Ein said without looking back.

Felix's lips twitched as he caught Piers' eyes, nodding his head to the door. "Don't hurt yourself, Ein. You're getting on in your years."

He got only a grunt in response.

Outside, a light flurry danced against the evening sky, backed in red. Felix pulled his cloak tighter around him as they trudged through the fresh snow. Sunshine's eyes wandered around them; Felix had grown used to the serenity Prox held on a calm day, a different calm than the one that blanketed Yallam at all times. A sigh of relief, instead of a sigh of boredom.

"I don't think he liked me," the smith said.

"Ein doesn't like anyone he meets," Felix said. "But he trusted your ability."

"How do you know?"

"He agreed to come. Don't disappoint him."

Sunshine fumbled with his own cloak, sinking further into it as he resumed his observations in silence.

By the time they stepped inside, snow had covered their clothes and hair. Only after a few seconds of shaking it free did Felix notice Puelle seated at the nearest table, a failure in awareness that gnawed at him for a few moments.

"Any luck?" the Proxian asked.

Felix nodded, pulling off his gloves and moving close to the fire. Even a milder winter in Prox still left extremities numb after a few minutes at night. "Ein's coming with us. We'll have him back as soon as we're done. It shouldn't take more than a few days."

"And this Champan smith will work with them?"

"I expect she'll complain about it for a while," Felix said. "But she'll do it, if only to keep her son and grandson safe."

Puelle nodded, leaning back in his chair. "The things we do for family," he murmured.

Felix stared at the older man for a moment, then glanced at Piers, one eyebrow quirked. The Lemurian answered with a neutral expression - too neutral of an expression, Felix realized. "Sunshine," he said, turning. "I need you to go find something a young child would like. Nothing large, just a small token."

The smith frowned. "Well... Okay, but why?"

"I don't have the greatest track record in visiting Champa, and I'd like to make a small personal gesture of peace, if I can."

"Wouldn't it be better if you picked something, then?"

"I believe Felix is subtly trying to get rid of you so that we can have a personal conversation," Puelle said.

Sunshine glanced between the two a few times, then nodded. "Oh. Yeah, sure. Is, uh, Piers coming too?"

The Lemurian sighed, seating himself at the end of the table. "Piers needs to accept the responsibility of being the cause of this conversation, I think."

Felix waited until the door closed behind him before sitting down, opposite Puelle. The hearth blazed behind the Proxian, working in preparation for the coming night. The crackle of the flames filled the house now, occasionally broken by the rattle of the wind against the windows.

"I suppose it would be easiest for me to just put it out there," Puelle said. "I am aware of what really happened in Mars Lighthouse. What happened to Karst. To Agatio."

"I apologize, Felix," Piers said, his head bowed. "When forging the blade with Einion, I...found myself having some trouble with my conscience. Among the things I eventually discussed was that...event."

Felix sighed, looking down at the table. He could see all three pairs of hands resting atop it. "I'm sorry, Puelle. Lying was never my intent, but... When Jenna told that story, I had to make a choice immediately, one I would have to stick to.

I've spent a lot of time wondering if that choice was right. I still don't have an answer."

"Lies are often used to hide guilt," Puelle said.

"Of which I have no small amount," Felix said. "I don't... Perhaps I was simply afraid. I knew, even then, that I would lose one home. Maybe I just didn't want to lose my place in another."

Puelle said nothing for a long moment, his hands rising up to support his chin. "Why did you never tell me, at least? Did you think that I would blame you? That I would take out my loss on you?"

He felt Piers' eyes on him, but could not bring himself to look to the other man for help. He had made this choice alone. "The truth is that...I don't know, Puelle. I'm not very good at lying. I don't do it often. I'm even worse at admitting to a lie. I knew you should know, of course, but..."

"You wanted to leave me with the meaningful lie, instead of the bleak truth."

Felix hesitated, then nodded.

Puelle stood, turning towards the fire, his arms across his chest. "One of my daughters died fighting a monster created by her own stubbornness and ruthless pragmatism. And now I know the other died for...what? A failure of moral righteousness? To serve as a test for another? No matter how I look at it, her death served no purpose at all."

Wind rattled the windows again, howling for a brief moment against the door. "She died for nothing," Puelle continued. "We are not unfamiliar with our children dying in such a manner here. That does not make it any easier. We always

find cause to celebrate what life they did have, to enjoy what they did with their time."

Puelle turned away from the fire, moving towards the table, but did not sit again. "I am not a man of far sight, as Altefeuer often reminds me. Perhaps the Wise One would have tested her at the beacon, as well. I do not believe she would have passed such a test, not as Isaac did. She would have watched the world freeze rather than sacrifice those she loved."

"She is not the only one who would have chosen that fate," Felix murmured.

"Perhaps her death there is what enabled you to win atop the aerie. Perhaps her quest for vengeance would have extended to Vale, once she had killed Isaac. Or perhaps they would have fought either way, injuring each other so severely that the lighthouse would remain unlit. I cannot say. I *can* say what has happened, though."

The Proxian leaned onto the table, waiting until Felix met his eyes. "Jenna's lie - *your* lie - gave significance to Karst's death. Her and Agatio's funerals inspired every Proxian in attendance. We have been merely survivors for so long. Passion like theirs has been rare, and it always accompanies great things. To have told the truths of their deaths... It would be a sour taste to start our recovery. It would fill people with despair. Instead, they are filled with hope and pride."

When the man fell silent, Felix broke the eye contact, dropping his gaze to the table once more. Puelle's words made sense. He had discussed the idea with Piers before, and suspected it was why Jenna had told the lie in the first place. Why, then, did he feel guilty about it still? Had it been

hiding it from Puelle? Was he simply uncomfortable with lying, no matter the effect?

No... He knew his own morality, and had eliminated such black and white standards long ago. He did not fully cast aside the means for the end goal, but often had he balanced the two, sacrificing his personal ethics for the greater good.

He could keep this secret from Prox. He could bury that guilt, live with it, knowing what it bought for them.

Isaac had not been the only one on trial, he knew.

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She closed the door behind her, slowing her breathing to pick out the outlines in the room. They almost seemed to glow, but emitting their light inside, rather than out. The room had little in it, small enough that she could cross it in a few steps, even in complete darkness, but she could not trust her memory anymore. Would not, maybe.

Maneuvering around the bed, she placed the two bowls on the nightstand. Her hands dove into the cool one with a washcloth, wringing and twisting, then repeating above the bowl.

He lay still as she brushed the damp cloth across his forehead, but she knew it woke him all the same. His breathing shifted, becoming more shallow, more rapid. He said nothing as she removed the cloth, draping it over the edge of the bowl. "Can you sit up? I need to replace your bandages."

The man did so, pushing himself up and leaning forward. Mia reached out and peeled apart the thin strip, unraveling it from his head with smooth, slow motions. As the other end

fell free, she grabbed it and set it aside, neatly folded. She rinsed the sweat from the washcloth, then soaked it with warm water. "Hold still," she said out of habit. One hand took gentle hold of his chin, while the other brushed at his closed eyes with the cloth.

His eyes opened when she released him. "I still can't see anything," he said.

"It's dark in here," Mia said, starting a new wrap with fresh bandages. "I don't want to risk damaging your eyes any further. I can barely see, myself."

The bandages swished as she wound them around his head. He sat still, his hands folded in his lap. She tried to focus on the bandages themselves, clearing her mind of everything else. Mia rarely had difficulty distancing herself when treating patients, but at the moment, she welcomed the extra help her training with Hama had produced.

"They're not going to heal, Mia."

She did not pause as she made her final loop, tying the end off. She had felt the same knots in the flow of his Chi, behind his eyes. "No. I don't believe they will."

He leaned back. She recognized the motion, knew he would have closed his eyes if they were not already bound shut. "Why are you doing this, then?"

"Because you're a patient," she said. "And because I've been wrong before."

He sighed. "Yes, you have. Thank you," he murmured.

Mia said nothing. She had not meant the words that way, but she had no desire to correct him. Her hand waved the

water all into a single bowl as she stacked them, turning to the door.

"The *Tomegathericon*... Is it gone?"

"Yes."

"Good."

That made her stop, one hand reaching for the door handle. She wrestled with herself for a moment, cautioning against such curiosity, but it won out, as it often did. The bowl settled onto a desk as she turned, moving towards the bed once more. "You're happy about it?"

Alex lay in silence for a long moment, not moving. "I was overconfident. That book... Do you remember me telling you of my translation attempts, at the beginning? When we went to the lighthouse?"

"Yes." He had spoken of the book's introduction: notes about the religion surrounding it, basic tenets of Psynergy control. She had come across a few other such books, documenting strange magic that always bore remarkable similarities to Psynergy. Some were focused, but most covered the same base concepts of Psynergy use that all Adepts came to learn, intuitively or by instruction.

"I was wrong."

Mia said nothing.

"Looking back, I understand the warnings it posed," he continued. "It... It was like an Alchemy tool, in many ways, able to channel pure Psynergy into a specific form. I only translated a small portion of the book, what I believe to have been the simpler spells. I can only assume what I saw from

drawings on later pages. Demons, broken bodies, blood..." He shook his head. "Things mortals... Things *people* are not meant to do. Some of the images were horrifying, even to me in that state."

"Under Atropos' influence," Mia said.

Alex paused, then shook his head again. "No. Well, yes. She directed my focus at...Marie. The *Tomegathericon,* though... Whoever wrote it understood that no one could fully use it without sacrificing their humanity. The tool that constructs the book is twofold: it channels your Psynergy, and also erodes your restraints, your conscience, whatever you choose to call it. That, with Atropos... A perfect storm of influences."

She watched his mouth twist into his usual humorless, mocking smile, though for once, it seemed directed at himself. "Is that your defense? That I should forgive you because you weren't yourself?"

A dry chuckle joined the smile. "No. I would say I was more myself in those moments than I ever have been. The purest form of me, reduced down to that single, driving devotion." Alex fell silent for a moment, and when he spoke again, the self-depreciating mirth had vanished from his voice. "Why did you save me? I... Why mercy?"

"Because you are more than the desire to bring back Marie," Mia said. "If you weren't, you would have been unaffected by Atropos and the book. I remembered the man you were, and the boy before that. Whenever I have the choice, I will always choose life."

He sighed. "Thrice I have betrayed you. You would be a fool to trust me again, and I would be a fool to expect it."

"I know," Mia said softly, opening the door and stepping through it.

She leaned against it for a long moment after closing it, her eyes closed. No. Not now. She could think about him later. Maybe.

Her feet began to move, carrying her through the palace. The path was unfamiliar, but she let them go, trusting them. She had little trouble letting her body guide her in times like these.

Mia pushed open the door to Ivan's room, surprised to find it as dark as Alex's. After a few moments of peering through the murk, she remembered the previous day. As the light from the hallway spilled across the bed, however, she heard a groan as the boy rolled over, pulling the blanket up over his face.

"Sorry," she said, pushing the door shut behind her. "I just wanted to check and see how you were feeling."

"Please kill me. It would be kinder."

Despite herself, Mia smiled. She took a deep breath, sensing out the room with Chi, then dispelled it. It was exhausting to try and hold for any length of time. Crossing to the bed, she sat down on the edge. "Don't worry. Once Garet gets back, he'll be saying the same."

At that, Ivan rolled back over. She could faintly see his eyes open in the bare light from the edges of the curtains. "Actually... I'd rather you didn't."

She frowned, opening her mouth.

"It's not that I think he'd get revenge or something," Ivan said quickly. "This... I'm pretty sure this was *his* revenge. He told me a while back that he'd get me back for something I did, and... Well, you know how much he always tries to get me to drink something."

"That doesn't mean now was the right time for it," she said.

He rolled onto his back, looking up at the ceiling. "Wasn't it? As much as I don't want to admit it, I think we all needed something to distract us from...from Tolbi."

Mia said nothing. Had she not done the same, in her own manner? She had busied herself, taking care of Ivan, taking care of Alex, trying to take care of Isaac, and Sheba, and Jenna. That was something she knew how to deal with, after all. Was that not why she had come here now? Rare were the moments she was not with one of them, or with Hammet, trying to make plans for surviving refugees.

She knew there would be some, at least. Those at the edges of the city were spared from the utter obliteration the center saw. They had pulled survivors from Kraden's palace, after all, and she knew there would be others.

Some would go to the Docks, she knew. There were plenty of inns, bars, and...other locales that could put people up temporarily. But the Docks had little in the way of actual materials; they might be able to expand, in the future, become a new city in their own right, but it would take time. Until then, she suspected many would come to Kalay, which could support them far more easily.

"He just...wanted to help me," Ivan said.

Mia stretched out her hand, smoothing down the boy's ratted hair, still twisted and tangled from his fight. Blood still

discolored a few locks, though she had cleaned it away from his face itself. "How is your nose feeling?"

One hand pulled itself free from the blankets and grazed across it, earning a wince, but moved in for a second touch. "Better. It doesn't hurt as bad."

She kept her hand on top of his head, Psynergy pulsing towards him. Aside from his nose and a fractured rib, Ivan had escaped with relatively minor bruises, burns, and cuts. A lot of them, to be sure, but well within the body's healing capability, particularly when accelerated with her Psynergy. Most of the cuts had already closed, and she expected the bruises would be gone by the end of the day. Even the two breaks were simple enough; she had seen many of them.

Her Psynergy continued, focusing on those two. "Ivan... I need to apologize to you. When you tried to warn me about...Alex, I... Well, I believed you, but at the same time, I didn't. I simply couldn't think of a situation where Alex would do such a thing to me. Or maybe I just didn't want to."

"Please, let's not play the blame game with this."

"I'm not trying to," she said. "It is, however, my fault that I couldn't trust you."

"It really isn't. I saw-" He paused, then continued. "I was having dreams of several different futures. They weren't making sense even to me."

"Do you still see them?"

"I don't know. I... After fighting Atropos, for the first time in a long time, I didn't have any dreams at all. But..." He trailed off.

"You had one last night," Mia finished.

Ivan nodded. "It's... We're not done yet. But maybe I can change it, still." He fell silent for a moment, then glanced up at Mia, a small smile forming. "I just realized that you keep ending up taking care of me in my own room after I get beaten up."

She pulled her hand away, returning the smile. "I'm well-known for my house calls. I'd like it if you would just stop getting beaten up, though."

"I'd like that more, I think."

Mia stood up, gesturing towards a glass on the nightstand. Water condensed, filling it and the pitcher beside it. "Keep drinking water. Psynergy doesn't do anything for the effects of alcohol, but water does. Keep drinking it. The worst is behind you."

As she reached the door, his voice called out again. "Hey, did Garet go to get the armor?"

"Yes, why?"

He frowned. "Just...wondering where he was."

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The doors swung open to admit him.

Garet walked up the steps.

Atropos stood inside the entrance hall, a long spear in her hand. The green blade at its tip, glittering like crystal, looked bigger than her head. White robes adorned her once

again, trimmed in gold to match the crown atop her head. "Leave us," she said, her eyes fixed on Garet.

The guards inside, who Garet assumed had opened the doors, bowed and exited the palace.

Atropos smiled. "Well. It seems the child's dream was right. Here you are, presenting yourself to me. I was worried you had not escaped the destruction of the City of Peace and denied me the chance to kill you myself."

Garet snorted. "You weren't listening too well when Ivan told you that dream, then. You're not the one standing at the end of it."

"Ah, but therein lies the treacherous nature of prophecies," the woman said, running her hand along the blade of her spear. "A vision of the future can only be changed when one knows what is coming. In telling me about the dream, little Ivan guaranteed that it would not come to pass."

"Yeah?" Garet tapped his sword against the stone floor. "Humor me."

Atropos clicked her tongue at him. "You are Martian? I so wish I could kill you with your own element, but alas, it was not meant to be. My own shall have to do."

The king raised her spear. Lightning snapped along it as she leveled it at him, the Psynergy coursing out at Garet.

He did not flinch. He kept his eyes locked on Atropos', even though the flashes of light made her difficult to see. The bolts arced around him, veering out of the way of his armor. They would not, could not touch him. They stopped a moment later, the look of surprise on Atropos' face bringing a humorless smile to his own.

"That armor..." she muttered. "Myrtle? We sealed all those mines..."

"Turns out a thousand years or whatever makes seals pretty irrelevant," Garet said. "Didn't quite expect that, did you, Miss High-and-Mighty?"

"I did not," she said, shaking her head. "No more than I expected to ever see the Fang of Tiamat again. You people continue to surprise me with your resourcefulness."

Fang of Tiamat? Maybe she meant the Proxian Blade. *A fitting name,* Garet thought. "Don't worry, you'll be surprised all the way to the end."

"Oh? Are you certain?" She stared at him for a moment, then frowned. "Your armor is well-constructed."

"Can't get your little mindhooks in me, can you?" Garet asked, raising his sword and pointing it at her. "Sorry, you actually have to do your fighting yourself."

Atropos shrugged. "I hope you don't think I'm averse to doing things myself. I may be a king, but I am far from lazy, child."

"You'll still die a king's death, just like Clotho."

"Then come," she said, one corner of her mouth twitching up into a sneer. "Come, and I will teach you what it means to be a king."

Garet did not run at the woman. She held a spear, the ideal weapon for keeping opponents at a distance; unless he backed her into a corner, something he felt sure she would avoid, she could backstep and keep him outside of striking

range for as long as she chose. A slow approach would never work like that.

Instead he pointed one hand behind him, a burst of concussive force hurling him toward her. His sword shunted aside her spear's head as he flew and his helm slammed into her face.

Atropos reeled back as Garet's feet found the palace floor, stumbling forward with her. The instant he found stability, he set his feet and swung the blade. He doubted it would be a killing blow, but any kind of pain seemed a suitable alternative.

She twisted, the spear's haft meeting Garet's blade. It rotated between them, pushing the sword aside as the butt lashed out at Garet.

He shrugged his shoulder up and turned his head. Most of the blow struck his armored arm, only a fraction scraping up to his helm. The blade withdrew, returning from another direction.

Again the woman parried it aside, and this time the bladed end of the spear struck out for the gap in his helm.

Garet dropped into a quick squat, the spear grazing his helm once more. Turning in the same direction she had pushed his sword, he stepped forward and shoved his shoulder into the woman's chest.

He heard her grunt as wind buffeted him; it swept around him, but threw Atropos away, up against the far wall. She stared at him, irritated, an emotion Garet considered himself an expert in invoking. "Simply going to brute force your way through everything? That seems like a strategy you would favor."

"I favor winning strategies," Garet said, pulling his sword back up. She could parry his blade, but with the armor to nullify her Psynergy, she had no chance of parrying his entire body. She didn't have the strength. Cornering her might prove measier than he thought, and once past the spear's head, she would be defenseless. "Don't like it? Feel free to try and stop me."

Mercury pulsed from her as she lunged forward, but Garet ignored it. Let her heal the cut on her lip. The longer she lasted, the more pain he could cause. When she dropped low, pulling the spear back, he realized the Psynergy had not been for healing. The smooth stone of the palace floor glistened. Atropos slid along it, jabbing her spear up at Garet's underarm as she approached.

He swore at himself as he twisted to avoid the strike, deflecting it with a solid plate. The distraction let Atropos slide past him to the wide open floor of the entrance hall. When he moved to follow, his boot slid on the ice for a moment, before a flare of heat returned it to dry stone.

An overhead swing followed after the woman, but was not met with a parry. Venus pulsed from Atropos this time as the floor itself seized her feet, pure strength pouring through her body and hardening her bones. The spear's haft rose to meet his blade and Garet's force crashed against the woman's base, unable to move her.

Garet stepped back before she could counter, watching her dispel the Psynergy. His armor had its limits. Though it stopped her from using Psynergy on him, it could do nothing to prevent her from augmenting herself with it, nor from adjusting the surroundings with it indirectly. Was that not how he had defeated the spirit legion in the first place? If he

could not lock her in place and get past that spear, he would never beat her.

No. He would not let this end in a stalemate. His entire purpose in coming was to kill Atropos. If he couldn't do that, then he had wasted the opportunity.

Some other strategy, then. A different approach. She handled the spear well and knew how to use its advantages against his sword. She could use her Psynergy to make up the difference in strength between them, both directly and indirectly. Brute force could work, but it needed something else to temper it.

Garet shifted his feet, letting one hand take his blade to the side, resting the tip on the ground. The other hand rose up, calling Psynergy towards Atropos.

The air around her shifted, explosive, but before Garet could detonate it, she scattered it with a burst of wind.

He paid it no mind, already dashing forward. Flames erupted on his blade as he swung an overhand blow, his hand sliding all the way to the pommel. Atropos raised her spear, using her Venus Psynergy to block the strike again, but Garet fueled the flames. They leaped out from his blade, devouring the air as they fought to taste Atropos' skin. She flinched back from the heat; a short twitch, quickly controlled, but Garet saw it nonetheless.

His boot followed up, forcing her to parry with another spin of her spear. Sword and foot, high and low, were pushed in opposite directions. For a moment Garet panicked, feeling his balance and momentum shatter. His foot landed awkwardly, his blade too far to the side to strike or block.

Atropos was not armored, however. He was.

So he pulled one hand from his sword and punched her in the face.

The jab held no real strength behind it, only what his arm could produce, but it snapped the woman's head back. She stumbled away as Garet balanced himself once more and leapt forward, flames streaking through the air with his blade.

The king retreated, her spear flashing up as it twisted and spun through the air to deflect his one-handed strikes. Mixed within his sword swings were punches, kicks, and jets of flame. More than once Atropos had to hop backwards to avoid his attacks.

Garet understood. He had done the same, when he first encountered the style, facing down Saturos on Mercury's aerie. It was a fast, brutal manner of fighting, designed to unleash as many attacks as possible, used to keep the four of them at bay. It left no time for defense, relying on the sheer offensive presence to prevent the opponent from attacking. It had scared the hell out of them, four novices against an experienced swordsman, making them pause where they might have attacked.

He doubted it had the same effect on Atropos, but it did not matter: she had little to attack with. Her spear's edge sought the small gaps in his armor, but under his relentless assault, she had no time to line up such a precise strike.

She realized the same. Wind blasted the ground, hurling Atropos away from Garet, out of his blade's reach. The stone of the floor rose up around him, first in thick segments, then blending together. It curled around him and stopped his advance, pinning him in place.

Atropos smiled, but Garet called his Psynergy. The stone exploded outward, the concussive force passing over his armor like a whisper's breath. He shifted his focus to Atropos, but her wind flashed out, scattering his combustion before it could ignite.

He alternated with streams of fire, launching them with both hand and blade as he approached. Water merged with wind, scattering out into the air, killing his explosions before he could even form them. She called it back to her as he switched to pure fire, raising a wall of water that intercepted all his flames. When he tried to detonate it, tongues of water licked out, dousing his attempts.

Garet paused for a moment in his advance, long enough to enjoy the momentary spike in temperature from Atropos' gathering of Mercury energy. His hand flashed white as he thrust it forward, a beam of pure Mars energy cutting through the air. It struck the water, flashing it to steam with a high-pitched shriek.

The steam obscured everything, but Garet did not need his eyes to feel it.

At the center of his beam, the wall of water gave way. The Mars energy overcame it, turning it to steam before punching all the way through to Atropos. The wall shifted to envelop Atropos, shielding her from the Psynergy long enough for Garet to pick out a fresh pulse of Mercury Psynergy. The barrier of water collapsed and his beam burned across an empty floor.

He spun around to find Atropos across the room, her hair disheveled and one sleeve blackened. She stared at him, but made no attempt to attack or speak.

Garet found himself as surprised as her. He could put a lot of power behind his Psynergy, but his true skill lay in his knowledge of how to apply it. He had meant to use the Psynergy as a distraction, to draw Atropos' attention and attack in another manner.

He had never, in any of his quick plans, accounted for the possibility of overpowering her own Psynergy. That just wasn't possible. She might not have known Mercury inherently, but the power of the Golden Sun gave her near limitless control over it. To outmuscle that, he would need-

Wait.

It couldn't be.

No *way.*

Garet held up one hand, an orange flame appearing above his palm. "Huh. Looks like we were all tricked." He poured energy into it, turning the flame yellow. "Guess you shouldn't feel so bad about it." The flame burned white. "Best place to hide something is in plain sight, after all."

More Psynergy than he had ever used poured into his hand, the white fire contained only by his will and growing brighter. He bypassed his own methods of rationing his Psynergy, turning straight to the well at his core, and found he could no longer see the bottom. He had no idea if there even was one.

This was the power of the Golden Sun. That limitless source of energy and power, a full quarter of the absolute power of creation. Had it been with him the whole time, instead of Isaac? How had he never noticed it before? Had he never needed to dig that far down, draw that much power, satisfied with his normal methods of rationing his Psynergy?

Atropos' eyes stared at the flame in his hand, flickering like some apparition in a bog. "The Sun," she whispered. "Give it to me."

"Uh, no."

"I will spare you and your friends," Atropos said, her eyes unwavering. "I will spare your cities. I will do anything. Name your terms."

He stared at her for a few seconds in silence. "My terms? My *terms?"* The words came out in a snarl. "My *terms* are a world that doesn't fear the Anemoi. My *terms* are a Tolbi that isn't destroyed. My *terms* are a friend that didn't die with it, another that isn't being eaten by guilt, and another that wasn't used as a personal punching bag. My *terms* are too much for you to afford, Atropos." His face pulled up into a sneer at the rage that crossed her face. "Don't worry, though. You'll get the Sun alright."

Garet's hand rolled over, the palm moving from the ceiling to the king. He reached into that well and found an ocean waiting for him. Waves of Psynergy answered his call, crashing from his mind to his palm. Pure white flames filled the chamber between himself and Atropos, so bright that he had to squint, unwilling to look away. He cut them off a few seconds later and the room dimmed. Black patterns rolled across the stone floor, shining in the morning light from the open doorway.

Atropos stood at the center of an unmarked section of stone, the scorch marks curved around her. *Wind,* Garet realized. Though he might hold a small advantage over her Mercury skills, she had the same innate understanding of Jupiter that he did of Mars, both with the same endless source to draw upon.

But she still had no armor.

The palace doors lay open behind her, but Garet knew she would never leave. Not while the final piece of the Golden Sun stood before her. Her pride and greed would never let her step outside, unless it was to draw him out. Were she to do that, he would lose the ability to corner her, as well as the ability to throw around his Psynergy. She could use the Anemoi to her advantage, forcing Garet to protect them.

Garet was not sure why she stayed inside, whether her pride prevented her from admitting she could not defeat him, or if she just didn't think of the benefits of taking the fight outside. He didn't care, either.

"We both made pretty big mistakes, Atropos." Flames ignited along his blade again as he swung, well out of range of the woman. She raised a hand, parting them, but Garet pulled them back together from either side. She parted them again, and Garet reversed four streams back onto her. He had so much *control!* He had learned his limits during his travels and pushed them afterward, but slowly. He never thought about how much simpler things seemed after their journey had ended. He assumed he had just become accustomed to his training.

The fractals of flame and wind continued, arcing through the air in an elaborate dance. "I should have killed you in your sleep. I wanted to, you know. But there was that nagging voice, constantly wondering: what if you were telling the truth? Your voice, I bet."

He marched forward. Atropos' eyes remained on him as her Psynergy swirled around her, keeping his own at bay. Their power was equal, and she had more experience with her element. He had lost count of how many streams danced

around her, a cage of pulsating flame links. He felt them in his mind; he needed no number. "But you messed up too. You're probably right. Knowing a dream lets you change it. But to do that, you've gotta be able to change it."

She could never change this outcome, Garet knew. She was powerful. She was experienced. She was not as rusty as Isaac mentioned Clotho had been. But she was still arrogant. She was still accustomed to a life of leisure, of servants, of getting what she wanted. She was used to making others do what she wanted.

She had little experience in doing it herself.

Garet had spent years training, ever since the storm in Vale. He never let it slide, never gave into excuses. He forced himself, every day, to follow his plans, to continue pushing himself. His successful entrance into Colosso had not surprised him, nor had he expected to lose. He knew he would have won, because that was what he trained for. He trained to fight. He trained to win, at all times.

The splitting stopped. The red threads around the Anemian pulled taut as the Valean reached her, binding down on the woman. Wind burst out, shoving them away, but they arced away once more, bending around Garet. He raised his sword as the wind buffeted him to no effect, the Mars energy behind him converting at his command, joining his strike. It wouldn't reach her. It didn't need to.

"You're fighting the greatest in the world."

He never doubted this outcome. He knew her, and he knew himself.

Atropos lacked discipline.

Garet did not.

The explosion shook the entire palace. Garet felt the reverberations through his armor as the light faded, Atropos hurtling across the chamber. She crashed into the ground and rolled across the stones before hitting the bottom of the double doors that led to the rooftop throne room. Her spear landed elsewhere, torn from her hands. Light shone through the open doors opposite her, Garet's shadow covering her.

Scattered flames lingered on as Garet stepped through them. His eyes remained fixed on the king as she pushed herself back into a sitting position, her elbows locked to support her upper body. Blood coated her lips, pooling in the middle of the bottom one and dripping down her chin. She made no move to wipe it away, glaring up at Garet. "You can't kill me," she spat. "If I die, the Golden Sun goes with me. It won't just transfer to you."

Garet held up one hand, white flames dancing along the palm. "Yeah? Good riddance. I've got the only part I'd want, anyway. Take the rest of it with you to hell."

Atropos screamed at him. No words that he could make out left her mouth, just a feral roar, mixed with spit and blood. Her wide eyes, shrunken pupils, and bloody teeth completed the image of a rabid animal on the floor, wanting to rip his throat out for no other reason than that it could.

Her rage sputtered and died as she began to cough, her posture breaking as she leaned down to the floor, painting it with more blood. Her entire body trembled as Garet watched, the flames vanishing.

He waited until the coughs ceased before he spoke, his voice shaking like the woman. "You have no idea the things I want to do to you, Atropos. The things you did to Ivan... You would

look like an amateur. But I've seen the way revenge twists people. Consider yourself lucky."

Despite her collapsed form, her head still flicked up to look at him. "Oh? After all I did to the boy, you're just going to spare me? After I burned and broke him with his own element?"

Garet grinned. "I'm not that nice."

She began to laugh. Her cackle bounced off the stones, echoing throughout the entrance hall. It dug into Garet's ears, making the man grit his teeth.

He raised his blade. She was slender, he was not. It would only take a single swing.

As the blade fell, Garet's feet pulled out from underneath him.

He slammed into the ground, the armor doing nothing to soften the landing, then slid a short distance backwards, Atropos moving out of reach. His sword stayed in his grip only out of reflex and conditioning. He tried pushing himself to his feet, but found his legs bound by something.

As he turned to find out what, his visor passed a pair of boots. One snapped out, slamming into his head. The force carried through the helm and it rebounded off the floor, light flashing in Garet's eyes. His whole head felt fuzzy and thick, thoughts struggling to push themselves through.

The helm shifted. Someone pulled it off and his full range of vision returned. It spun for a moment, then settled on the face of a tall, blond man in white armor. His green eyes were all too familiar.

"Well," he murmured, staring down at Garet. "Isn't this convenient?"

One hand moved to his forehead as Lachesis sank to one knee, Psynergy pulsing from him. Garet gasped without sound as he felt himself drawn towards the king, despite not moving. The edges of his vision grew white as he struggled to remain conscious, unsure of what was happening, but feeling very, very *wrong* about it.

And then, like the cork pulled from a barrel of ale, he felt his Psynergy draining out of his body, guzzled down by the Anemian king. Some part of his mind recognized what was happening, connected it to other knowledge, but he could not focus on it. Every task had become complex beyond words. He had to focus on his breathing. On not collapsing back to the floor. On keeping his eyes open.

Another voice cut across the room. Not Lachesis, not Atropos. He knew that voice. Whatever it said, the terrible drain ceased a moment later. Garet gasped for air as his lungs returned to automatic use, every muscle in his body strained to exhaustion.

He would not let that clarity escape him. He blinked three times, then shifted, sweeping his eyes around. Atropos still laid against the doors, her eyes now watching Lachesis. The king had backed away from him, but Garet could do no more than think about lifting his sword at the moment.

Sheba stood in the doorway, her hands balled into fists at her sides.

"Phoebe," the man said. "You dare show your face here, after your betrayal?"

The girl opened her mouth, but the words Garet expected never came. A pulse of Mercury Psynergy brought Atropos to Sheba, and though the woman collapsed to one knee upon her appearance, she still had strength enough to hold one hand out to the girl. Jupiter flowed between them, the same syphon drawing energy from her that had just drawn the same from him. "All our children are traitors, it seems," she rasped.

Footsteps echoed in the hall. Atropos ignored them. She never saw the hand until it slammed into the side of her neck, driving her away from Sheba and into the wall.

Lachesis held her up with one arm as his own Psynergy filled the air. "You hold no authority over my daughter, nor any room to speak of treason, Urania."

Her fingers clawed at his hand, scraping across the white gauntlet. Her own Psynergy pulsed, trying to defend against Lachesis' assault, but his own had already shattered her ability to concentrate.

"Did you think I knew nothing of your plans?" His hand squeezed tighter, the color in the woman's face rolling between red and white, then back again. "My dreams have been warning me of your desires for the better part of a century. I'm fortunate that we are both patient, however." His grip loosened again, allowing her to draw in a breath. "Thank you for collecting this for me."

She dropped as he released her. The woman slid down the wall and collapsed, her hands flying to her throat. Her hair faded to white and one hand reached out, clutching at Lachesis' boot.

He pulled it out of her reach and she sighed before collapsing into dust.

Garet could not move. Sheba had stumbled against the open door when Lachesis pulled Atropos away from her, but her gaze had not left the pair since. He wanted to tell her to run, to get away, but he knew doing so would only draw Lachesis' attention. She could not outrun him.

When the king turned, however, it was not to Sheba, but to Garet. His hand raised and the nauseating syphon returned. Clouds of exhaustion and confusion filled his mind again, but they vanished just as quickly.

Sheba had stepped inside, one hand still on the door for support. "I'll... I'll stay," she called out, breathless.

"You will stay regardless," Lachesis said, his hand still pointed at Garet.

"I'll stay willingly," she said, pausing to draw a deep breath. "I promise. I'll... I'll stay here. Just let him go!"

The last remaining king watched her for a moment. "You realize that he will simply lead the remainder of your allies back here to rescue you, where they will all die." He received silence in response. "Very well. I would rather deal with them now, than wait and allow them to continue to harass our efforts. Guards!"

He turned away from Garet as the pair of men dismissed by Atropos moved through the doorway. "Remove this man's armor. When you have finished, escort him to the edge of the city and send him on his way."

He made no effort to resist the guards as they doffed his armor. Even had he seen a point in doing so, he lacked the energy to do so. They stripped it away, piece by piece. Psynergy smothered Garet; while he could barely feel his own reserves of Psynergy anymore, the ocean of power

gone, he still felt the wall rise up between them. He noticed the same seal settling over Sheba.

As the guards led him down the stairs, he glanced back to find Sheba watching him go. She mouthed a single word to him before Lachesis' hand landed on her shoulder, moving her out of sight.

One.

One king left.

One king who now held the complete power of Alchemy, as well as a complete immunity to Psynergy.